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Abe Colt, the Crow-Killer; OR, THE GREAT FIGHTING MAN OF THE WEST.

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KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB," "KENTUCKY,
THE SPORT," "INJUN DICK,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FORT BENT AND THE WAGON-TRAIN.

It was at the close of a bright May afternoon; the last rays of the sinking sun shone down gayly upon the broad prairie, through which, like a great yellow serpent, rolled the turbid waters of the Yellowstone river—a river that took its rise at the base of the Rocky Mountains and then flowed eastward, until it poured its current into the great Missouri. Just at the junction of the Yellowstone and the Powder rivers, the sun's rays shone down upon the whitewashed walls of Fort Bent, a frontier post, located at the confluence of the two rivers, to guard the wagon-trail to Montana. The advance of civilization has now caused the fort to be removed, but at the time at which we write it was the last halting-place for the wagon-trains bound for any of the small settlements nestled here and there upon the golden-streaked rocks of Montana. After leaving Fort Bent, the trail ran by the banks of the Yellowstone, two hundred miles or so, then turned abruptly north toward the Rocky Mountains. This was called the southern trail. The northern route was by the bank of the Missouri.

Fort Bent was garrisoned by a single company of United States troops—a hundred men or so. Under the shelter of the fort a few trading-houses had sprung up, designed to supply the wants of the emigrants in powder, ball, blankets, or any of the little articles necessary for a journey of three hundred miles through the wilderness. For, as we have said, after leaving Fort Bent, the way led through the fertile valley of the Yellowstone, a valley abounding in rich grasses, the little clumps of timber that fringed the river being filled with game, the stream itself well stocked with fish—a country that only needed the strong right

arm of civilization to bloom and blossom like a fruitful garden.

The wagon-trail through this lovely country was not without its dangers. Near Fort Bent the fierce Mandan tribe of Indians flourished; their hunting-grounds stretching from the Big Horn river to the little Missouri. Sometimes, too, wandering bands of the Sioux, the ruthless marauders of the Missouri, extended their forays as far as the Powder river. Deadly foes were they of the Mandan tribe.

And then, after following the wagon-trail along the bank of the Yellowstone, passing where the Big Horn river emptied its waters, swollen always by the melting snows of the Rocky Mountains, into the first named stream, we enter upon the dominion of the Crow nation, the Indian kings of the North-west—the tribe whose warriors wear the claws and teeth of the grizzly bear as necklaces around their necks, sign and symbol of their prowess—the

greatest fighting men of all the tribes that roam the great wilderness of rock and prairie from the Gulf of California in the south, to the Columbia and Missouri rivers in the north—the warlike tribe that has fought the powerful "Blackfeet" for ages, and yet more than held their own against them—the tribe whose war-cry is a terror to the gold-diggers of Southern Montana.

And so, after passing the junction of the Big Horn and the Yellowstone rivers, the old mountain men, the prairie guides, prepare for danger; and few wagon-trains, unless large in numbers, pass through the valley and turn northward to Montana, without losing stock or men on their passage.

Now that we have described the scene of our coming story, we will return to Fort Bent, where a wagon-train is at the moment resting, preparatory to daring the dangers of the march through this wilderness.

The fort and its vicinity presents a lively scene. The soldiers are chatting with the members of the train, inquiring the news from the East and eagerly perusing the newspapers that have been brought by the emigrants.

The train was composed of some twenty wagons, containing, perhaps, sixty souls all told, men, women and children. There were twenty-three men in the party, besides the two guides, a force sufficient to beat off any ordinary Indian attack, if handled skillfully, of which there could be but little doubt, for the two guides—the captains of the train—were men skilled in Indian warfare, and had a reputation as Indian-fighters second to none on the upper Missouri.

The two guides stood together on the foremost wagon, leaning on their rifles, surveying the scene before them with a listless air. They were known as Abraham Colt and David Reed—called Abe and Dave, commonly, by their friends. Abe was the elder of the two, a man of about forty-five years of age. Tall and straight, he stood nearly six feet high; but weighed not more than a hundred and fifty pounds—all muscle, bone and sinew, no useless flesh about him. A professional prize-fighter, would have looked at him in admiration. From his earliest boyhood he had been accustomed to the wild life and dangers of the prairie. His father had been a guide before him, and had reared his son to his calling. The father had died on the prairie, shot through the temple



THE FLYING SHOT.

in a Crow attack on a wagon-train—had died in his son's arms, almost instantly after receiving the ball. From that hour Abe had sworn an oath of vengeance against every red-skin in whose veins ran the blood of the Crow nation.

The story of the death of Abe's father, and of the oath of vengeance of the son, was of course well known to all the frontier-men; and he was looked upon as a sort of a hero, for, since his father's death, which occurred some twenty years before the time at which we write, Abe had encountered the braves of the Crow nation in many a desperate fight on the prairie trail by the Yellowstone; and in every contest the guide had been victorious; every time the Crows had attacked a train in which Abe acted as guide, they had been repulsed with great slaughter; his presence seemed to be fatal to them.

Abe would never have been taken by a stranger for the famous Indian-fighter; there was no sign of the desperado about him. His face was well browned by the prairie winds and the rays of the sun; his eyes were large, and gray in color; his chin was shaven as smooth as a young girl's; his features were strongly marked and the deep wrinkles about the eyes and mouth told of hard service and troubles. He was dressed Indian fashion, in a hunting-shirt of deer-skin, trimmed with porcupine-quills; leggings of the same material, fitting tightly to the leg; moccasins, ornamented with little leaden tags, curiously shaped; upon his head he wore a cap, formed of a portion of a coyote's skin, with the tail hanging down behind. His hair, black as an Indian's, was worn short and curled in little ringlets tight to his head. He was a picture worthy the pencil of the artist as he stood leaning carelessly upon his rifle, gazing upon the little groups before him. One approaching him from the rear would have taken him from his dress to be an Indian chief.

His companion, the other guide, was a young man, probably not over twenty, called David Reed. His history was a strange one. A party of United States troops, some nineteen years before the time of which we write, had surprised a party of Blackfeet Indians encamped near the head-waters of the Missouri. The savages had been on a raid against the white frontier settlements on the upper Missouri, and the soldiers had followed in pursuit. They surprised the Indians and a bloody fight ensued; the Indians were outnumbered and nearly exterminated. After the fight, the soldiers found a baby boy snugly wrapped in a blanket near the Indian camp. From his dark complexion and from the outline of his features, they concluded that he was a half-breed, possibly the child of one of the Indian braves by a white wife, because it is a very common thing for the Indians to carry off white girls in their frontier raids and force them to become their wives. Why the child should have been carried with the war-party contrary to the usual custom of the savages puzzled the old Indian-fighter, who acted as guide to the soldiers. He carefully examined the encampment, and finally discovered the footprints of a woman. It was evident, then, that there had been a squaw with the party, and possibly that squaw was one of the white wives that the great chiefs sometimes have; though why the chief should carry her on a marauding expedition was a mystery.

The soldiers took the child back with them to their post; the infant was apparently a year old. The captain in command of the troops acted as sponsor to the child thus strangely found in the desert, and called it David Reed.

The infant grew apace. Years passed on; the child became a man and adopted the profession of prairie guide, and was noted on the upper Missouri as one of the surest shots and best guides in all the upper valley.

In appearance, he was a fine-looking fellow, standing about five feet nine, well proportioned and well built; his face was pleasing; there was something noble about it—an air of native dignity, akin to that of the red-skins; his eyes were large, jet-black and full of fire; his nose long and straight; the chin, square and well-formed, firm-set lips, that showed resolution and strength of purpose; his bronzed face, the high cheek-bones and jet-black hair, that slightly curled at the ends, worn long and floating down over his shoulders, alone showed the Indian blood.

He was dressed roughly. A red shirt, thrown open carelessly at the neck and exposing his finely-formed throat; a pair of dark butternut homespun pantaloons that had been cut open at the side and fitted into the leg, Indian fashion; a pair of moccasins, which, from the peculiar trimming, an old Indian-fighter would have pronounced to be of Sioux manufacture; a belt of untanned deer-skin girded around his waist, sup-

porting a broad-bladed hunting-knife and a serviceable-looking revolver, and we have the picture of Dave Reed.

Reed had met the "Crow-Killer" in Montana, some three years before the time at which we commence our story. A singular friendship had sprung up between the two men, and from that time they never had separated. Lucky was the wagon-train that obtained the services of the "Crow-Killer" and young Dave Reed, as his friends called him, for a trip across the upper plains!

"Does that fellow there belong to our train?" asked Dave of the "Crow-Killer," directing his attention to a man who stood apart from all the rest near the bank of the river.

"Whar?" asked "Crow-Killer," turning his eyes in the direction indicated.

"That one there, wrapped up in the blanket as if he had the chills," and Dave pointed to a man standing near the river, with his back to the two guides. The stranger was wrapped in a dirty red blanket which completely covered him. On his head he wore a common black felt hat, from under which long black locks fell down over his shoulders, forming a striking contrast to the red blanket.

Abe took a long look at the motionless figure.

"Well, do you know him?" asked Dave. "Nary time!" answered Abe. "He looks like an Indian, durned if he don't. He's a powerful big feller, I should judge."

Just then the stranger turned round and exposed a face a few shades darker than that of Dave's, but not dark enough to proclaim the owner to be an Indian, or, if he was one, one much lighter in color than the generality of his race. The face of the stranger was an odd one; high cheek-bones, the dark color, the flashing black eyes, no sign of a beard—all these would proclaim him an Indian; yet, the long black hair curled slightly at the ends, and was much finer than the usual coarse locks of the red-skin.

As he faced toward the two guides, the eyes of the stranger wandering listlessly over the talking crowd, Abe got a good full view of his face and started in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" questioned Dave. "That man's face!" answered Abe, still staring intently upon the stranger.

"Well, what of it?"

"Why, he's the perfect image of you!" Dave now started in surprise, and turned his keen glance upon the stranger. As Abe had said, save that the unknown was darker in color, there was, indeed, a wonderful resemblance between the two men—the same long black hair, curling at the ends—the same flashing black eyes, the same expression on the face, almost the same size, and features marvelously like those of the young guide.

"Yes, he does look like me," said Dave, surveying the stranger with a puzzled air.

"Like you! You couldn't be more alike if you were run in the same mold," said the "Crow-Killer."

"It is very strange, to say the least," Dave spoke thoughtfully.

"Strange, you bet!" answered Abe, tersely.

And yet, at this very moment, to a close observer, there was something else stranger than all, and that was the resemblance in the general expression of the features that both Dave Reed and the stranger bore to Abe, the "Crow-Killer." Their eyes were black and his were gray, and yet they looked alike. Had they been clad alike, a stranger would have taken the three for father and sons.

"He looks like an Injun, and yet he is too light colored for one," said Dave.

"Yes," responded the "Crow-Killer," watching the unknown with a keen glance, "he ain't one of our party I know. I guess he's a stranger hyar, too, for he don't seem to know any of the folks round. He don't look exactly like an Injun, but he may be one with white blood in him; that would account for his light color."

"I'll go over and find out who he is," said Dave.

"Go it, young hoss!" answered the "Crow-Killer," "that's a good idea."

One of the corporals attached to the post at this moment approached the two guides.

"Who is that chap over thar? do you know him?" asked the guide.

The corporal took a good look at the motionless figure, wrapped in the gaudy blanket.

"I don't know him; a stranger in our ranch, I reckon."

"You have never seen him before then?" said Dave.

"I think not. I think he's one of the Mandan Injuns come in to get some whisky or something of that sort."

"He ain't no Mandan," said Abe, after another good look.

Dave bent his steps toward the stranger.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT FIGHTING MAN OF THE CROWS.

ALTHOUGH the stranger was apparently indifferent to all that passed around him and seemed half asleep, yet his quick eye had noticed the two guides in conversation, noticed the glances they had cast toward him, and had rightly concluded that they were speaking of him; then, when he saw Dave walk toward him, he quietly turned his head in the direction of the river as if seeking an avenue of escape in case of danger. As if satisfied, he turned his attention again to the crowd near the fort. Dave came up to him.

"How are you, stranger?" said the guide.

"Well," answered the unknown, in a deep, guttural voice that instantly proclaimed its owner to be a red-skin.

"Is the chief a Mandan?" questioned the guide.

"No," was the laconic answer of the stranger.

"Sioux?"

"Yes."

"What tribe?"

"Yancton!" responded the stranger, who, Indian fashion, was sparing of his words.

"What brings the chief to Fort Bent, so far away from his home?" asked Dave.

"Ah-ke-no is a chief of the Sioux; he fought the Mandan braves on the Powder river. In the dark he lost his brothers, he traveled north to the wigwams of blue-coated braves. He is at peace with his white brothers; he is hungry and would eat; he is thirsty and would drink. Ah-ke-no is a great chief of the Yanctons!"

The savage uttered his story with a stolid face, while the quick flashing of his eyes changed into a dull gleam.

"Did my brother come on foot?" asked Dave.

"The chief is not a mud-turtle," answered the savage; "he does not crawl when he can fly like the eagle. My white brother will look," and the chief pointed to a small, open space between the fort and the river, where a white horse, strangely marked with small patches of black in the flanks, and of matchless beauty, tethered to a stake, lay upon the ground.

The guide gazed upon the steed with unbounded admiration. He had seen many a horse of wondrous beauty, but never one to compare with that milk-white steed of the chief.

"My brother's horse is handsome," said Dave.

"The chief is a great brave among his warriors; he rides on the wind. The mustang never lived that could overtake the 'White Vulture'!"

"Your horse?" questioned Dave, wondering at the name.

"The chief has said," responded the Indian, with savage dignity.

"If my brother is hungry, come to the fort and eat," said Dave.

"My brother is good; the blue-coats have fed the Sioux chief; his hunger is gone."

"Will you return to your people now?" questioned the guide.

"As fast as the crow flies to his nest; his braves mourn him as dead and gone to the happy hunting-grounds, but the scalp of the Sioux chief will never hang in the smoke of a Mandan lodge," and the savage drew his tall form up proudly. Then, bending his eyes on the train, he asked: "Does my white brother hunt with the white wigwams, that go to the setting sun?" and with his eyes he indicated the emigrant-wagons as he spoke.

"Yes, I am their guide," answered Dave.

"And the tall chief, who wears the hide of the coyote," indicating Abe, who was in conversation with the corporal, as he spoke, "does he hunt with my brother?"

"Yes; we are the chiefs of the train," said Dave, wondering at the curiosity of the Indian.

"What is my tall white brother called?" asked the red-skin, pointing to Abe.

"Abe Colt."

"Crow-Killer?" questioned the savage, with a slight uneasiness perceptible in his manner.

"Yes," answered Dave, secretly wondering that his companion's name should be so well known to the Yancton Sioux; "you have heard of the 'Crow-Killer' then?" he asked.

"The deeds of a great brave on the war-path travel like the white clouds, when the winds

blow over the prairie. The 'Crow-Killer' is a great chief," answered the Indian, a peculiar gleam in his dark eyes, as he looked upon the famous Indian-fighter.

"When the moon comes, the Sioux chief rides like the wind for the Big river (Missouri); his warriors wait for him, and the singing bird that sings for the chief, sings not when the wigwam is empty and the nest is cold." Then the Indian gazed upon the crowd with the same stolid glance as before.

Dave having gained all the information that he could, rejoined Abe and the corporal.

"Wal, who and what is he?" asked Abe.

"He says he's a Sioux of the Yanton tribe, separated from the rest of his braves in a fight with the Mandans on the Powder river; and that he came here for food and drink," answered Dave to Abe's question.

"Well, now I think of it," said the corporal, "I remember hearing the boys saying something, this morning, about an Indian coming in, hungry, and they giving him food."

"A Yanton Sioux, eh?" said Abe, half to himself.

"Yes; what do you think of him?" asked Dave.

"Wal, I don't exactly know," replied the "Crow-Killer," thoughtfully; "but ef I were to meet that Injun, a hundred and fifty miles west from hyar, I'd say he was a Crow, an' be willin' to bet my life onto it."

"A Crow!" cried Dave.

"That's so, hoss; though I noticed he's ripped off the trimming of his moccasins and leggins, so as to make 'em plain and disguise his tribe. Now, if he were a Sioux, why does he come skulking hyar in disguise—that's what I want to know?"

Just then the "Crow-Killer" was interrupted by a horseman dashing into the little village from the upper trail leading up the bank of the Yellowstone. The horse was covered with lather, showing that he had been ridden hard; the horseman, a sturdy-looking fellow but pale as death in the face, drew rein in the center of the little square formed by the fort, the trading-houses and the wagon-train; then tumbled from his horse exhausted. A crowd gathered around him.

"What's the matter?" "What is it, stranger?" were the questions poured in upon him by the bystanders.

"The devil's to pay!" gasped the stranger.

"The Injuns are up again on the Yellowstone trail, thick as grasshoppers in summer."

"What Injuns?" yelled half a dozen excited voices.

"The Crows!" replied the stranger, who thereupon proceeded to tell his story. He had left Montana with a party, composed of two wagons loaded with furs, and ten men; they had not seen signs of Indians until after passing Great Falls and striking across to the Yellowstone; then they came across an Indian trail, which one of the trappers pronounced to be that of a war-party and about three days old; but, as the trail led directly southward across their line of march they did not anticipate any danger. But, on the first night after striking the Yellowstone river, they were attacked by a large party of Crow Indians; the trappers fought bravely but were overpowered and forced to leave their wagons and seek safety in flight. How many of his companions had escaped he knew not; but he, possessing a very swift horse, had succeeded in passing the line of the encircling savages and in escaping by reason of the fleetness of his horse; but, in escaping from the Indians, he had been compelled to leave the lower trail and go northward, and had been five days in reaching the fort, which, had he come straight by the bank of the Yellowstone, he might easily have made in four.

Dave and Abe had listened intently to the tale.

"Stranger, I believe you said the red devils were Crows?"

"Yes," answered the trapper.

"What chief might be at the head on 'em? Do you know?" asked Abe.

"Yes; Dick Sawyer, my partner, recognized one of the chiefs, an' he seemed to be the head one of the party. He said it was 'White Vulture,'" said the trapper.

"You don't say so!" and the "Crow-Killer" indulged in a low whistle of astonishment. "Why, he's the biggest fighting man in all the Crow nation. They do say he's a perfect 'painter' on the war-trail. I never see'd him yet, but I'd like to!" and there was a strange tone in the old hunter's voice, and a strange glitter in his eyes, as he uttered these words. His fingers, too, clenched tighter around the

long barrel of his rifle, and there was an expression upon his face which boded danger to the Crow chief.

"I didn't see much of him," said the stranger, "cos I were in pretty considerable hurry to git for the open country, but he's a heap on fight, I should say, for he cleaned us out in about twenty minutes, an' we made a tough fight of it, too."

"Do you think any the rest of your friends escaped?" asked the captain in command of the fort, who had been an attentive listener to the trapper's story.

"Wal, I don't exactly know," said the trapper, scratching his head thoughtfully. "I guess my partner, Dick Sawyer, would get shot of them, if any in the party would, 'cos he has a powerful running hoss—an animal that was jist chain-lightning on the go. It were a hoss from the south. Dick give a couple of hundred for him, an' that's a fancy price, you know; but he were awful fast, an' jist as handsome a critter as I ever laid eyes on. An' I kinder think that if any of the party got away 'sides me, it were likely to be Dick an' his white hoss."

"A white horse?" asked Dave, a sudden suspicion coming into his mind.

"Yes," answered the trapper, "a hoss jist as white as milk, 'cept it had a patch or two of black upon its flanks, an' the prettiest beast you ever saw."

Could it be possible, that the Crow chief had the bravado to come into the fort in disguise, and right after his attack upon the trappers? Dave looked around for the Indian; he had disappeared! The guide quietly left the little knot of people and went toward the bank of the river. The white horse was gone; the Indian as well. Far in the distance, on the trail leading up the river, Dave saw the stranger mounted on the white steed, riding at full speed.

"Curse you, red-skin!" he muttered; "you've been after no good. I'll meet you one of these days, and I'll put a bullet through you, though you do look enough like me to be my brother."

The young man rejoined the little knot of people around the trapper, who were eagerly discussing the particulars of the late attack.

Dave drew Abe aside, and told him his suspicions. Abe heard all with a grave shake of the head.

"I had an idea that that Injun was a Crow," he said. "Some way or other I can generally tell 'em; but, though I hate the whole nation and never yet spared a Crow that I got within rifle-range of, yet I should dreffully hate to put a bullet through this fellow, for he looks so much like you."

"You think then that I am right in my suspicions?"

"Sart'in; you've hit the right nail on the head. That Injun was the 'White Vulture,' the greatest fighting man of all the Crow nation, though he's a mighty young brave."

"He can't be older than I am," said Dave.

"No, I should say he wasn't. I first heard tell on him about three years ago, when I were up trading in the Blackfoot country. A party of Blackfeet made a raid down into the Crow region, an' at the first on it, they whipped the Crows right out of their moccasins; they took this 'White Vulture' prisoner, tied him to a tree to torture him a little, but, before they lit the fire under him they amused themselves by seeing how near they could come to his head throwing hatchets and scalping-knives at him in their devilish fashion. Well, some way they hadn't tied him very strong, and one of the hatchets, thrown carelessly, cut one of the thongs that bound him. In a twinkling he burst the rest of the bonds, seized one of the hatchets, laid about him right an' left, killed five of the Blackfeet braves almost instantly, and then made a rush for life and escaped, although the whole party gave chase. Then, after he got back to his tribe he collected a few warriors, and hung about the rear of the retreating Blackfeet, picking off a man hyar and there, until at last their retreat became a rout and they hurried north as if the devil himself was at their heels. Well, I were in the Blackfoot country when the party got back, an' of course I hear all about it. The next year, the 'White Vulture' returned the visit of the Blackfeet, and raided all through their country, with a small party, too, hardly losing a man. From that day to this his fame as a great brave has been increasing; the Crow Indians themselves regard him with superstition; they think he's a great medicine-man; they don't believe that the bullet was ever run that can kill him; in fact, to-day he's the head-chief and the greatest fighting man in all the Crow nation."

"I'm afraid that if he ever comes again within range of my rifle I shall convince the Crows that there's a bullet in my pouch that will settle him," said Dave, with a grim smile, tapping the butt of his rifle.

"Do you know, Dave, that I don't want to meet the 'White Vulture'?" said the "Crow-Killer," solemnly.

"Why not?" asked Dave, in amazement.

"Because I should have to kill him, and that I don't want to do. Strange, too, that up to today we have never met. The last time he attacked a wagon-train between here an' Fort Benton, I was to go as guide with that same train, but at the last moment, just as we were starting, I had a sort of feeling which said, 'don't go!'—a sorter voice that seemed to whisper, 'don't go,' right in my ear. I didn't go, but got another man in my place; I thought I was acting like a fool at the time; wal, that train was attacked and the stock all run off; an' the Crows were led by this same 'White Vulture.'"

"Well, that was strange," said Dave.

"It were more than strange," replied the old guide, in a solemn tone. "I've got a notion somehow that it isn't fated that we shall ever meet in fight, an' then ag'in, I get the idea that if we ever do meet it will be the death of one of us."

"It'll be the 'White Vulture' then that'll go under. I'll bet my life on it," cried Dave.

"I don't know that, Dave, I don't know that; he's a good fighter, quick as a cat an' savage as a painter. They do tell me that he's the best runner in his tribe and a sure shot with the rifle. If we meet in a fair fight, I think he's got the advantage of me. The Indian owes me a debt of vengeance for I killed his father."

"You did?" said Dave.

"Yes."

By this time they had reached the open prairie, just beyond the wagons; there they paused.

"Sit down," said Abe, "and I'll tell you all about it."

The two guides sat down upon the grass. Abe closed his eyes for a moment thoughtfully, as if striving to remember the past. After a moment of silence he spoke:

"Of course you've heard, Dave, that my father was killed out here on the Yellowstone trail by these Crows, and died in my arms?"

"Yes," said Dave, "I have heard the story."

"An' I suppose hearn, too, how I swore to be revenged upon all the red devils of the Crow nation?"

"Yes, I heard that also."

"Wal," said the guide, "I did a good deal in wiping 'em out in fair fight, but the bitterest revenge that I took wasn't in fair fight. It were about two years after my father's death, an' the border-folks an' the Injuns had already begun to call me the 'Crow-Killer,' that a large lot of the Crows came into Fort Benton to sign a treaty and have a big talk with the Injun agent. I was at the fort at the time an' the Crows were mighty anxious to get a look at their devil, as they called me. Of course, as they were there on a peace-mission, I couldn't very well take their top-knots, but I wanted to, for the blood were hot in my veins in those days. Being on a peace-talk they had brought their squaws with them, an' among the squaws was the prettiest Injun I ever saw. She was called 'Little Star,' an' she were a star! Although she were a Crow, I fell in love with her, an', as it 'bout always happens in just such cases, she fell in love with me. She was to be the wife of one of the young braves named 'Rolling Cloud'; the 'White Vulture' is his son. Wal, the 'Little Star' an' I used to meet nights outside the fort, she were dead gone on me—I were called a handsome feller then—an' were willin' to leave her tribe an' go with me. Wal, I loved the gal, Injun though she was, an' I took her. One morning both she an' I were missin'. We went down the river, an' I married her, Injun fashion, for thar wasn't no minister nigh. Wal, my takin' the gal riled the Crows awfully. I pitched my shanty with a little settlement on the Missouri, an' for two years I were happy. There were some things happened in those two years, but I don't care to speak of them. At the end about of those two years, I came back one night an' found my cabin destroyed an' my wife gone, an' from that day to this I have never hearn word of her, but in an Injun fight out hyar, I met the 'Rolling Cloud.' We had a fair tussle, an' I downed an' knifed him, an' as he died he muttered something 'bout the 'Little Star,' which makes me think the Crows know something of my wife's fate."

CHAPTER III.

THE HEIR TO RATTLESNAKE GULCH.

FOR a moment or two after Abe finished his story there was silence. The old guide closed his eyes and leaned back upon the grass. It was not often that he spoke of the past, and the remembrance of that past brought a flood of bitter memories to his mind.

Dave, too, was thinking. He had heard some particulars of the life of the "Crow-Killer," which were current topics in Southern Montana and along the Missouri; but that the great enemy of the Crow nation had married a daughter of that tribe was news to him. The "some things" that had occurred during the married life of the "Crow-Killer," which he had not explained and barely mentioned in his story, puzzled Dave; it was evident that there was a mystery connected with the past life of Abe Colt, and that the "Crow-Killer" imagined that the Crows held the threads of that mystery, which one day they might unravel.

The thoughts of the two guides were interrupted just then by the approach of two members of the wagon-train. The two men were father and son; their names were respectively Eben and Richard Hickman. Eben was a man probably forty-five years of age, large and powerfully built, with an ill-looking, treacherous face, shifting, light-blue eyes, yellow hair and beard, his cheeks thin and hollow, and an expression of greed and cunning upon his features. The son, Richard, resembled the father in looks and build, only with a far better-looking face. His hair was cut short, and the expression upon his features was not an unpleasant one.

The father, Eben, was in business in a little mining town in Southern Montana, known as Spur City; the son had just come from the East, to join the father, who had met him at St. Paul.

"When do we start?" asked Eben Hickman of the guides.

"To-morrow morning at four," answered Dave.

"Do you think there is any danger from Indians on the way?"

"I can't say; you heard the news the trapper brought, didn't you?" asked Dave.

"Yes," answered Hickman.

"The red devils are on the war-path, but I don't expect that they can trouble us much, because we're too many for them. They'll probably try it, but we'll flax 'em if they do," said Dave.

"You think there is danger of an attack then?" questioned the elder Hickman.

"Sart'in" answered Dave, "just as sure as we are hyar at Fort Bent to-day."

"The Indians always attack at night, I believe?" said Eben.

"Yes, generally," answered the guide, curtly. He had taken a dislike to the Hickmans, both father and son, a dislike he could not well explain.

Eben Hickman stood for a moment as if in thought, then turned to his son. "Come, Richard, we may as well look after our ammunition." So the two walked back toward the fort.

"Ammunition, blazes!" said Abe, emphatically. "If thar's any fighting to be done, I guess both of those chaps will be more likely to be behind a wagon than facing the Injuns."

"That's what I think," cried Dave; "I hate the sight of both those fellows, I don't exactly know why, but I s'pose it's because I think they're a couple of cowards."

"I think thar's another reason, Dave," said Abe, in his quiet way; "a pretty good reason, too, an' that reason's a female."

"Eh?" stammered Dave, getting as red in the face as a blushing girl.

"Jus' so!" responded the "Crow-Killer." "Guess I ain't blind yet, Dave. It's a mighty suspicious sign when a young gal likes to leave the wagons an' ride alongside of the guides, an' hear stories 'bout bufler-huntin' an' Injun-fightin' an' sich like."

"Why, you don't think that Miss Leona cares any thing 'bout me, do you?" asked Dave anxiously.

"Wal, it's hard to say; thar's no tellin', sometimes, 'bout these gals. I'm death on readin' Injun sign, but a woman gits me. But, I look at it in this way: when I see the print of a moccasin on the prairie, it's nat'ral to conclude that some one's been thar; when I see a young gal likes to be in the company of a young feller, an' seems to take pleasure in being with him, I don't think I'm fur off from the trail to say that she likes him. Now that's just the way this case stands, as near as I can fix it."

"But, I say, Abe, you've forgot one thing: she's a well brought-up girl, been educated and all that sort of thing, an' my bringin' up has been rough; mighty little schooling I've been through," and the young guide shook his head thoughtfully.

"You're a durned sight better educated than I am," said Abe, "an' I reckon I can hold up my head with any man on the upper Missouri; besides, that ain't everything; a man must have brains too. This Miss Leona is a sensible gal, I take it; she wants a man to fall in love with—a man with muscle an' nerve, fit to fight his way through the world, not a dandy chap that would faint at the sight of an ax or at the smell of gunpowder, but a man she can look up to, one that can protect her, care for her an' love her all at the same time."

"Yes, I think you are right there; she seems to be a very sensible girl," replied Dave.

"That's so," responded Abe. "I've had my eyes open ever since we left St. Paul; she can't bear the sight of that Dick Hickman, though he's been trying to be mighty sweet on her. I've seen it! She gits out of his way as much as she can, though he's always arter her. I should think the feller would have sense enough to see that she can't bear him, but there's some men in this world haven't got as much sense as an owl. You see, as I haven't had any Injun sign to look arter, I've been amusing myself by watching the humans round me."

"You think, then, that the girl likes me?" asked Dave anxiously.

"Sart'in, I'd go my mile onto it, an' I ain't got much to go an' can't well afford to lose that little, but I'd bet high on it."

"But I'm a poor man," urged Dave.

"Jus' so, but arter we get to Montana we'll try the gold-diggin's, an' who knows we mought make a big strike thar. If the gal does love you, why she'll wait a little while for you, an' if she won't wait, why she don't love you, an' the quicker you forget her the better; that's sense, now I tell you."

"Well, Abe, I believe it is; I have not tried to make the girl love me, but I will try now, and if she does love me, that's all I ask for in this world"—and the young guide's face shone with a smile of happiness as he leaned upon his elbow and thought of the golden locks of the pretty Leona, to him the prettiest girl in all the world.

"You're right, Dave," said the "Crow-Killer," thoughtfully, "a good woman's love is a treasure in this world; years have gone by since I lost my little Injun wife, but I haven't forgot her. Thar's a mystery about her death, for I suppose she was killed when the red-skins burnt my cabin, but I ain't sure of it. She may be alive, even now, up in the Crow nation. One of these days I'm goin' to take a party up thar an' see if I can't diskiver the truth. Thar's something else, too, that I want to know; thar's a sort of suspicion in my mind that thar's a reason why I an' the 'White Vulture' shouldn't come together. I want to capture a Crow Injun, an old chief, one as old as myself, if I can, an' if he'll only speak the truth to me, he can tell me of some things connected with the Crow nation that I want to know."

We will now leave the two guides and follow the Hickmans, father and son, as they walked toward the fort.

"That fellow Dave is not over civil," said the son.

"No," responded the father, "I don't think that he bears either of us any great love."

"I think I can guess the reason," said Richard, with a sneer.

"That is not difficult to guess," responded the father, a sneer also upon his lips. "The fellow has a fancy for Leona."

"Exactly what I think," said Richard.

"And from what I have seen, I rather fancy that the girl is not indifferent to him," continued the father.

"I know that she likes him," responded Richard savagely, "I see it plain enough. Don't she ride by his side nearly every day at the head of the train? Hasn't he been bringing her flowers from the prairie, and don't she always stick tight in the wagon whenever he's out on a scout or a hunt, and the moment he returns, don't she always get tired of being in the wagon and want to ride? Why, it's as plain as the nose on my face. I tell you, father, what little sense Dave Reed has got is all tangled up in Leona's red hair. Curse him! for I've taken a fancy to the girl, and she don't seem to care anything more about me than she does of the dirt under her feet."

"I am sorry to say, my son, that I think you have spoken the truth. I'm very sorry for it,

for I wanted the girl to fall in love with you," said the father, a crafty smile upon his thin features.

"Well, I know that," responded the son, moodily. "It was you that put it into my head to make love to her. I shouldn't have thought of her as a wife but for you. What did you want me to make love to her for?"

"Ah!" and the father shook his head, "that requires an explanation."

"Well, suppose you explain; I'm tired of working in the dark. I'd like to know what you are driving at."

"Very well," and then the father looked carefully around him to see if any one was within hearing, but no one was near. "You know that I left the East a year ago to try my fortunes in Montana. In going across the plains, I made the acquaintance of a man named Daniel Vender—"

"Vender! Why that is Leona's name," interrupted the son.

"Exactly," Daniel Vender was her father. On the march we shared the same wagon, and became very intimate. He told me all about himself and his plans. He came from the town of Greenfield in Massachusetts; he had left a daughter behind him there—he had been seized with the Western fever, as they call it; had converted all his valuables into cash, and was going to Montana to embark in mining. If he succeeded and liked the country, it was his intention to send for his daughter and make Montana his home. He took quite a liking to me—we were both about the same age—and proposed to me to join with him in a claim. Well, you of course know, Dick, that I had very little money; so I was glad to join with him.

We arrived in Montana safe, and as we couldn't find a claim to suit us at first, we bought out a trader's stock and started a store at Spur City. We did first-rate, and in a few months had doubled the money we put into it. Then there came a chance to buy a claim in a new mine just struck, about twenty miles west of us, in a place called Rattlesnake Gulch. The way we worked the store was that Vender put in nine parts of the money and I one. We bought the claim in the same way; so you see that I only had one-tenth interest in it. Well, about two months ago Vender was suddenly taken sick. His sickness did not last long, for in four days from the time he was taken down he died. This would have been a very bad thing for me, for the store and the mine were both making money, but Vender left a will, deeding to me all his property."

The son looked at the father with a peculiar glance.

"He forgot his daughter in his will entirely then?" he asked.

"Yes." The tone of Hickman's voice was hard and dry.

"Wasn't that rather strange?" questioned the son.

"Perhaps some people might think so," was the reply, a sly but furtive look appearing in the shifting blue eyes.

"What did the people around there think of it?"

"Oh, nothing was said about it. There wasn't any one in the whole place except myself knew that he had a child; and besides, as he distinctly said in his will, that he left all his property to his cousin, Eben Hickman, what could people say?" asked the father.

"His cousin?" cried the son, in astonishment.

"Yes, that was me, of course. Vender and I came to the town together; he was a quiet sort of a fellow, kept himself to himself, made very few friends, and spoke not at all of his private affairs; therefore no one knew anything about him; no one disputed the will, and I came into possession of all his property," and the cunning eyes twinkled with delight as he spoke.

"Let me see. I believe you're quite clever with the pen, ain't you?" asked the son, with a grin.

"Oh, tolerably clever!" and the old villain chuckled with delight as he thought of the wrong he had done the dead man.

"But, how did you fix it about the witnesses? I should have thought that would have bothered you."

"Oh, no! I got two drunken miners to affix their names to it; things in the law way are rough out here; no one made any objection to the will, or, in fact, made any inquiry about it at all. I took possession, and of course hold the property now."

"How much is the whole thing worth?" asked Dick.

"About fifteen thousand dollars," answered the old man.

"Then this girl, this Leona Vender, is the real heir to—"

"The mine known as Rattlesnake Gulch—exactly," said the father. "As soon as I had the estate fixed up and properly made over to me, I wrote East for you to come on; and the very same day that I received your letter telling me when you would start, I received a letter from this girl Leona, of course directed to her father, telling him when she would start to join him; and she was to come just one week after you. By her letter I guessed that Vender had sent her money to come on with—perhaps told her of his success and of his prospects. Now, this letter struck me cold. Of course if she ever arrived at Spur City, she would instantly expose me, and the chances are that, if she ever does get there, proclaims her relationship with Daniel Vender and denounces me as an impostor, the citizens of Spur City will give me a taste of Judge Lynch, for justice is very speedy in the mountain region when they once get their hands in."

"What do you think of doing?" asked the son, anxiously.

"In the first place, let me see what I have done, so as to make the case all complete," said Eben. "I wrote you that I would meet you at St. Paul. I did so. The girl, in her letter, said that she would come by that route. That was the reason why we waited a week there; you remember you wondered at my delay. Well, I was waiting for her. I kept close watch. At last she came; I found out all about her, and made arrangements to come in the same wagon-train. Now, then, this was my calculation. I was pretty sure that Vender had never written his daughter anything about me. I took pains to be introduced to her. I noticed that she manifested no surprise at the mention of my name, which convinced me that my suspicions were right, and that she had never heard of me. If you remember, I cautioned you not to say anything about Spur City, or that I knew anything of the place, to any of our companions. My first plan was this: I thought that the girl on the journey might take a fancy to you; if she would only fall in love with and marry you, why, then, every thing would be all right, for, of course, she wouldn't want to prosecute her father-in-law for forgery, and the whole affair would be settled forever."

"Yes," responded Dick, dryly, "but she isn't a-going to take a fancy to me. I think, father, that she would be just as likely to fall in love with you as with me. That cursed guide has got her eye; his copper-color skin and Indian-looking head have taken her for all she's worth."

"He might be got out of the way," suggested the father, a treacherous gleam in his eyes.

"Yes, but not by violence; he's an ugly customer to handle. Besides, I don't think the girl would like me any way, the little red-headed minx—"

"Gold! golden hair, you know," interrupted the father.

"It's near enough to red, any way, but that of course ain't neither here nor there; the girl don't like me; there's no use beating about the bush in this matter. We might as well fix it out straight, and I don't think she would ever like me, even if this guide, Dave Reed, was out of the way altogether."

"As you say, we might as well understand the matter," rejoined the father. "One thing is certain—that girl must go into Spur City your wife, or not go into it at all."

There was menace in this speech of Eben Hickman, which boded no good to the orphan girl.

The two walked on thoughtfully for a few moments, the father watching the son's face from under his yellow eyebrows. At last, Dick spoke:

"I don't see very well how you can make the girl marry me, unless she wants to, and if she don't want to, as is very evident, I don't see how you're going to keep her from going to Spur City."

The elder Hickman looked around again carefully; no one was near; then, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, he asked:

"You heard my conversation with the guide, didn't you?"

"Yes, what of it?" asked Dick. "What has that got to do with us?"

"A great deal. You heard him say that there was danger of an Indian attack, and that the Indians generally attack at night?"

"Yes, I heard that too; but, come to the point; what do you mean?" asked Dick, impatiently.

"Why, Indian bullets respect no one. If the

savages attack us in the night, they are just as likely to kill her as any one else."

The son did not fully read the father's language.

"Yes, but she will be in a wagon, protected somewhat, and she may escape unharmed."

The father put his mouth close to his son's ear.

"If the Indians attack us, she will be killed!"

Dick started in surprise; he understood his father now.

"But the danger of detection!" he cried, in a low tone.

"None at all. In the confusion of a night attack, who can tell whether a shot is fired outside the camp or within it?" asked the father.

"Very true; but suppose the Indians do not attack us?"

"Then I'll think of some other way before we reach Montana."

The precious pair of villains walked back to the fort, having come to an understanding.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GIRL WITH THE RED-GOLD HAIR.

THE glowing sun had set in the west—a huge ball of fire that seemed to sink into the ground. The shade of night had fallen, and darkness veiled in the distant prairie. Supper had been prepared and eaten by the emigrants, and some had begun to arrange to retire for the night.

The moon, three-quarters full, was rising slowly, casting its clear, pure light over the vast plain, chasing the darkness away and dancing in little waves of light on the yellow and swiftly-flowing waters of the Yellowstone.

The fires of the emigrants threw out their uncertain and flickering light upon the faces of the little groups that surrounded them. All were speaking of the dangers of the journey before them, and many a tale of Indian warfare and border peril were rehearsed around the watch-fires of the wagon-train.

By the wagon that stood nearest to the river's bank a little group of four people were seated—three women and one man. The man was called Grierson; one of the women, the elder one, was his wife; the other, who resembled her strongly in features, was her daughter, Eunice by name. The mother and daughter were dark-eyed and dark-haired, presenting a decided contrast to the last of the group, who was a young girl, who did not look over sixteen. She had one of those sweet, innocent, childish faces that win favor at the first glance—a face once seen, never to be forgotten—there was something so odd, so striking about it. The face was little, but a perfect oval, with a high, white forehead, dark-blue eyes, full of life and expression, dimpled cheeks, slightly tinged with a crimson flush, that relieved the white, pearly skin, a little chin exquisitely shaped, full, pouting lips, red as ripe cherries, a long, straight nose, and then, the charm of the head—the red-gold hair that hung in profusion, in little tangled ringlets, clinging elfishly together almost down to her little shapely waist. In figure she was a little sprite of a girl, exquisitely proportioned, with the daintiest little feet and hands. In brief, she was innocence and grace personified. Such was Leona Vender, the fairy, who had tangled up the honest heart of Dave Reed, the guide, in the silken meshes of her red-gold hair.

The Grierson family were neighbors of the Venders in Greenfield, and hearing how well Daniel Vender had made out in the Far West, had determined to try their fortune in Montana and had made preparations so as to set out at the same time as Leona. Leona of course was very glad of their company, particularly as Eunice, the daughter, had been her school companion and was her dearest friend.

Leona, although looking like a mere child of fifteen, was in reality nineteen years of age. Eunice, her friend, was one year older.

"Well, wife," said Grierson, rising from his seat near the fire, "I guess I shall go to bed. We start at four in the morning, and as we make a long march to-morrow, we shall need all the rest we can get. Girls, don't sit up late."

"No, father," answered Eunice, speaking for both.

Grierson and his wife retired to the shelter of wagon.

Leona was gazing dreamily out upon the surface of the rolling river, whereon the moonbeams danced like so many silver sprites. Eunice noticed her abstraction.

"A penny for your thoughts, Leona!" she cried, stroking down the curling locks of her friend's hair.

Leona started a little; a faint smile came to her lips, as she answered in a low voice:

"Perhaps my thoughts are not worth a penny."

"Oh, Leona!" cried Eunice, "what a little humbug you are! Not worth a penny! Well, now, if I were thinking of what you were thinking of, and you should say what I did, I should have answered that my thoughts were worth a great many pennies."

Leona smiled again, then looked shyly at her friend.

"How can you know what I am thinking of? I hardly believe I know myself," said Leona.

"Let me word your thoughts, then, for you. A tall, manly figure; long black hair, curling, oh! so romantically down over his shoulders; a pair of jet-black eyes; an honest, handsome, earnest face—and the—the—the—the wish that he might think of somebody as somebody thinks of him. Come, confess, ain't I right?" and Eunice put her arms around the slender figure by her side and drew the shapely little head with the silken curls down upon her shoulder.

"Yes," came in a whisper from the lips of Leona.

"There!" cried Eunice, triumphantly, "I knew that I was right, and, you little cheat, to try to deceive me!"

"But, Eunice," rejoined Leona, "I don't know that he cares anything for me."

"Then you must be blind!" exclaimed Eunice, impulsively. "Why, I can see that he worships the very ground you walk on. When we are riding with him at the head of the train he never takes his eyes from you for a single moment. Now, he's something like a lover; he's never obtrusive, yet always near at hand to do you service. If he don't love you, then you will never be loved by mortal man, and your fate will be to die an old maid."

"Are you sure that he loves me?" asked Leona, dreamily, her fingers pushing the little curls back from her forehead.

"Of course I am! I only wish some such nice-looking fellow would fall in love with me. I wouldn't let him grieve himself to death for want of a loving word."

"But, he has never said that he loves me, although I own from his actions that I thought he did," replied Leona.

"Very likely. He's bashful; he's not one of your city chaps, that have such a good opinion of themselves that they think every woman they meet is in love with them. He's an honest fellow—as brave as a lion, and as true as steel. I tell you what it is, Leona, if you don't give the poor fellow some encouragement, I shall set my cap for him myself, for I give you fair warning that I am half in love with him already."

"Why, Eunice!" and Leona looked into her friend's face, half in reproach.

"There now, don't be frightened. I sha'n't take your lover away from you—probably for the best of all reasons, and that is, that I couldn't get him if I wanted him."

"But, if he loves me, why don't he tell me so?" demanded Leona.

"Why?" cried Eunice. "Because he's a bashful goose like you are. When we are riding at the head of the train, you and he say scarcely a word to each other, while the other guide, the one they call Abe, and I, have had fine chats together."

"Why, no!" said Leona, in her earnest way; "you are quite wrong; he has told me all about his life—how he was born here on the frontier and has always lived on the prairie—how he has hunted buffalo, and some dreadful stories about the Indians."

"And I dare say you listened to them with those large eyes of yours opened to their widest extent, and that, with every word he spoke, you loved him more and more."

"Yes," murmured Leona, softly. "I do love him, and I know I shall never love any one else as I love him."

"Well, then, the sooner you understand one another the better; but, Leona, do you think that your father will consent?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Leona, "I am sure of it; he loves me too well to refuse. Besides, when he sees Mr. Reed, I feel sure he can not help liking him."

"Oh! your poor little kitten," cried Eunice, twining Leona's red-gold ringlets around her fingers; "because you like him, you think everybody else must."

"Here is Mr. Reed coming," added Eunice, quickly. "Now you have a fine chance for a walk along the bank of the river—a moonlight walk—and if you are not both great geese, you ought to be able to find out whether you like one another or not."

The manly figure of Dave came into the circle of light thrown out from the fire.

"Good-evening," he said, as he advanced.

"Good-evening," replied both the girls.

"Oh, I'm glad you have come," Mr. Reed. Leona has been wanting an escort for a walk up the bank of the river in the moonlight, and I am too tired to go." Eunice cast a merry glance at Leona's scarlet face as she spoke. Dave did not notice Leona's confusion; he was only too happy to be able to enjoy the society of the fair young girl, to him the dearest girl in all the world.

"I shall be happy to offer myself for an escort," he answered.

"And she would be happy to accept the offer," cried Eunice, "and you too," she added, mentally, "if you would offer yourself."

"There is no danger, I suppose?" Leona said.

"Oh, no!" replied Dave, "we will only go a little way beyond our picket-line, and then we can return."

Abe, as captain of the train, had thrown out regular pickets, as though on the prairie.

Leona got a cloak of dark cloth from the wagon, wrapped it around her, took the offered arm of Dave, and the two walked off in the path leading up the river.

"Now, if they don't discover whether they love each other or not, before they come back, then they ought to be ashamed of themselves!" cried Eunice to herself, as she looked after their retreating figures.

Leona and Dave walked on arm in arm; they passed the picket-guard by the river, and got beyond the limits of the camp.

Dark clouds had begun to gather on the hitherto clear sky, and every now and then one would sail across the moon, shading the earth in darkness for a few moments; then the moon would shine out clear again until another cloud followed.

No sounds were stirring on the still night-air save now and then the shrill cry of some little earth insect, burrowing beneath the feet of the lovers.

"Do you think there is danger of the Indians attacking us before we reach Montana?" asked Leona.

"It is difficult to say," replied Dave. "We are a large party, and the Indians seldom attack unless three to one. They don't care about fighting if they can help it. If a large war-party should happen to come across our trail, why then of course they would trouble us; but we are not likely to meet any large parties; and the small ones will try and run off our stock if they can, but they'll keep out of rifle-range."

"If there should be an attack, you would be exposed more to the savages than any of the rest, would you not?" asked Leona.

"Of course, my partner Abe and myself, being captains of the train, are expected to front all the danger—that is what we are paid for," returned the guide.

"It is a terrible risk you run," said Leona, with a half-shudder at the thought of the possible danger.

"Well, Miss Leona," said Dave, in his honest, straightforward way, "we must all die some day, and from what little I have seen of the world, I should say that we were always in danger. When a train is attacked that I'm with, somehow I never think of the chance of my getting killed. The fact is, I'm always too busy looking out for the safety of the train. And if there's anybody got to die by the hands of the red devils, why, better me than a man who has wife, sisters and daughters that love him. You know, for I have told you, that I am alone in the world, and if I should go under and these red heathens take my top-knot, there wouldn't be any one in the world to grieve for me."

A cloud at the moment was passing over the moon, which shaded the earth in darkness, and Dave, if he had looked at Leona's face, would have seen that her eyes were filled with tears.

"You are wrong," Leona said, in her low, sweet tones. "There is some one in the world that would mourn for you."

Dave thought for a moment, then he spoke:

"Yes, I forgot the 'Crow-Killer.' I believe he does love me like a brother, although he is old enough to be my father, and until a short time ago we had never met."

"Then there are two that would mourn for you, for there is another besides him," Leona was blushing scarlet at her own boldness. Dave detected a meaning in her tone and words that sent a thrill of joy to his heart; and Leona, feeling his arm tremble within hers, knew that she was understood. When two people love each other, and wish each to know of that love, as a general thing it don't take very long for them to discover the truth, and so, as they walked on

in the darkness, walked on beside the winding river, Leona and Dave knew that they loved. Oh, happy moment, when the first love fills the heart, that before had been vacant!

Dave was the first to break the silence.

"Leona," he said, "I've wanted for a long time to tell you how much I cared for you, but I never found the courage to do so until now. I'm only a poor guide, but if you'll give me your love, I'll work hard and build up a home for you that one day you won't be ashamed to share."

"I should never be ashamed of any home where you are, David," replied Leona, looking up into her lover's face, with those trusting blue eyes, so full of innocence and love. "I cannot give you what you ask, for it is not mine to give—it is yours already."

Dave Reed had never felt so happy, and so the lovers walked on, weaving bright hopes for the future—that future which always looks so bright to those who love.

Dave, so engrossed by the sweet girl at his side, had not noticed a dark figure that moved when they moved, and halted when they halted; and now, as the lovers sat down by the river-bank, hand in hand, and whispered low words of love and of eternal faith, the shadowy figure extended itself flat on the prairie a hundred yards or so from them, and became invisible in the gloom.

A few hundred feet from where the lovers sat was a little thicket of dwarfed oak trees. Concealed behind the thicket from the view of the fort and the wagon-camp, stood a white horse, spotted on the flanks with patches of black. 'Twas the horse of the Indian who had called himself a chief of the Yankton Sioux. As the moon was again obscured by clouds, forth from the little thicket came the Indian himself. Snake-like he crawled toward the lovers, who, listening only to each other, did not dream that danger was nigh. On came the savage, noiseless as a cat. In his hand he carried a long scalping-knife; his face was bedaubed with war-paint, vermilion and white. Every second brought the creeping savage nearer and nearer to the unconscious pair. He had accomplished half the distance between the thicket and the lovers, when for a few moments the moon again struggled forth and threw its beams over the prairie; the savage sunk down in the grass. When the moon was again obscured, he recommenced his onward passage. But if his approach had been unnoticed by the lovers, 'twas not so with the shadowy form on the prairie. That watcher evidently had seen the Indian, for, imitating his motions, he made his way noiselessly through the grass, also toward the lovers. When the savage got within ten feet of Leona and Dave, he paused for a moment, gathered himself together like a cat—he had not noticed the dark form in his rear, so intent was he on his prey—sprung upon Dave, and aimed a lightning stroke at his back; but, at that very moment, Dave moved a little to the right, to kiss, for the first time, the upturned lips of Leona—a movement that saved his life, for the knife of the Indian, missing his body, only cut through the loose red shirt. The force of the shock, though, sent Dave headlong off the bank into the river. In a moment the Indian seized Leona, raised her in his arms and was about to fly across the prairie, when the dark shadow which had trailed him in the grass, and which was none other than Abe, the "Crow-Killer," sprung upon him. The Indian relinquished Leona, who sunk to the ground, to grapple with the "Crow-Killer." His only object now was to escape, but the grasp of the old Indian-fighter was not easily shaken off. They closed in a fearful struggle; the moon once more shone forth, and they beheld each other's features; the surprise was mutual.

"The 'Crow-Killer' cried the savage in the Crow tongue.

"'White Vulture!'" exclaimed Abe.

"Yes, son of 'Little Star,'" cried the Indian.

For a moment the grasp of the "Crow-Killer" relaxed; the savage tore himself away and fled across the prairie toward the thicket, where stood his horse. Abe drew a revolver and leveled it at the flying Indian; a moment he covered him with the shining tube; he was in easy range, and the "Crow-Killer" was a dead-shot; a moment he held the life of the White Vulture at his mercy; then he slowly dropped the revolver from the poise, muttering:

"Not by my hand; his blood must not be on my head."

Dave speedily gained the bank, nothing hurt by his involuntary bath, and they all returned to the camp. Abe charged both Leona and Dave to say nothing of the attack, as it would

only create useless alarm. The Indian having gained his white steed, fled in the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

THE CROWS ON THE WAR-PATH.

EARLY on the following morning the emigrants broke camp and started on their march up the Yellowstone trail. Abe and Dave rode on before.

"That was a bold move of the Injun last night," said Dave.

"Yes," answered Abe; "I expected that he might be lurking nigh our camp, arter I saw him in the afternoon. That was the reason that, when you and the gal headed for the prairie, I kinder thought that you would be so took with the gal's bright eyes that you wouldn't be able to look out for yourself," and the old hunter indulged in a dry chuckle.

"I own that it was careless, but I didn't think that the red devils would ever dare to come so near our camp and the fort."

"Jus' so, but this 'ere 'White Vulture' has got a white man's head on his shoulders as to judgment and dash, combined with the deviltry and cunning of the Injun. Why, if it hadn't been for me, he'd have carried off the gal as sure as my name's Abe Colt. It was a bold thing, an' it would have been successful if luck hadn't 'a' gone ag'in' him."

"One thing, Abe, puzzles me," said Dave.

"An' what is that?" asked the "Crow-Killer."

"How he escaped after you clinched with him?"

The old hunter paused for a moment before he answered, but after a little while he spoke:

"Wal, he said something that staggered me. I let up on the grip, an' then he slipped through my fingers jus' like an eel."

"What did he say?" asked Dave.

"Not much; only that he was the son of 'Little Star,'" replied Abe, a peculiar expression appearing upon his features.

"And 'Little Star' was the Crow girl that you married?" cried Dave, in astonishment.

"Jus' so. If you remember, I told you that I had a kind of a sort of a feelin' that it was ag'in' my nature to hurt the 'White Vulture,' although he belonged to the tribe, not a red sucker of whom I ever spared when I got within rifle-range of 'em."

"Then the 'Little Star' must have been carried to the Crow nation and married to one of their chiefs," said Dave.

"That air likely; but a Crow warrior that I met onc't at Fort Benton on a peace-talk, a brother of the 'Rolling Cloud'—that's the father of the 'White Vulture,' that I killed—walked up to me an' asked if I were the 'Crow-Killer.' Wal, I expected a tussle thar an' then, but he only looked at me, an' said in the Crow language: 'The Crow-Killer' is a great chief; he is as strong as the white bear; he killed the 'Rolling Cloud,' but the Crow chief has a son, the 'White Vulture,' an' he will take the scalp of the 'Crow-Killer'; it will dry in the smoke of his lodge, an' the Crow nation will be glad. The 'Crow-Killer' is a great brave, but when he is tied to the torture-stake, the Crows will speak words in his ear that will make him howl like a dog—words that will turn him like fire; then the chief walked away. Now, I've puzzled considerably to know what those words air. I s'pose it's something 'bout my Injun wife, the 'Little Star,' but I hadn't any idea that the 'White Vulture' was her son, an' it kinder considerably started me when I hear'n he was. I've a sort of suspicion now what them words air a-goin' to be, that's goin' to make me squeal. But then, ag'in, thar's another thing that gits me: I never hear'n of this chief—this 'White Vulture'—having any brother, but still t'other one might have died. Anyway, one of these days I shall find out all about it."

"Yes, you'll find out easy enough: just let the Crows get hold of you—"

"Jus' so!" interrupted Abe with a shrewd smile, "but I ain't in a hurry to have that happen. My top-knot is well enough as it is, an' I don't intend that any Crow shall lift my ha'r if I can prevent it. I'll give 'em pretty considerable of a tussle first. But, I say, you took a long walk last night; did you an' the little gal come to an understanding?"

"Yes," answered Dave, a smile lighting up his features.

"Wal, I thought it probable that you settled matters; but, I say, Dave, don't give the red devils a chance at you ag'in."

"Don't fear; but I did not think that there was the slightest danger. I don't believe that there's another red-skin on the plains that would have dared to attempt it."

"We ain't seen the last of him yet," said Abe,

gravely. "If we don't have a big fight before we reach the head-waters of the Yellowstone, then I'm a sucker an' no Injun-fighter."

"I agree with you," said Dave; "but it will take a big party to clean us out. We ought to be able to whip a couple of hundred red-skins at the least."

"That's so, Dave. This fellow being around the fort looks mighty suspicious; he was on a spying expedition to see how big a party we were. He's a long-headed Injun, is this 'White Vulture'; he knows if he can only flax out the 'Crow-Killer,' it will be a big feather in his cap among his nation. An' my opinion is, that he'll try mighty hard to do that; so we must keep our eyes open. I reckon they won't trouble us until after we get past the Big Horn river, but, arter that time look out for lightning. In about two days, if I don't miss my calculations, we'll have Injuns all around us, thick as fleas in a Mexican Ranch."

So, on went the wagon-train—Abe and Dave keeping a sharp look-out over the rolling prairie.

At noon the train halted for a couple of hours for rest and food. At two o'clock the train was again in motion, the vigilance of the guides increasing as they progressed further into the prairie waste.

During the noon halt Dave had found time to exchange a few words with Leona. He frankly and without reserve told her that danger was at hand, that the train was liable to be attacked at any moment, and that at the first sounds of alarm for herself and companions to lay down in the wagon, the sides of which would afford some protection. Leona's cheeks paled a little, more, though, at the thought of her lover's danger than at her own.

"You will be careful, Dave," she said; "be careful for my sake."

"Yes," he responded; "don't fear, Leona. I shall come through all right; only look out for yourself, that's all, because if I thought that you were needlessly exposed, it would take away half my courage."

Leona, like a good girl, promised to be careful.

The danger of an Indian attack was known now to all the emigrants, and as the train rolled on, the men looked carefully to their weapons and prepared for the expected encounter.

Abe and Dave were ahead as usual, their keen eyes eagerly and carefully scanning the broad expanse of the prairie before them.

So far, even the watchful glance of the old Indian-fighter had not detected a single sign of Indians being near. No fresh trails were upon the prairie.

Early that morning, before the march, he had carefully examined the hoof-prints left by the horse of the Indian chief, commencing at the little thicket; the trail led across the river and off in a south-western direction, but this did not relieve the mind of the guide; he knew the Indians too well; he conjectured that the party under the lead of the "White Vulture" were probably encamped somewhere near the Big Horn river, and that their intention was to follow the river north and thus strike the course of the train.

At six that afternoon the train halted for the night; they had made forty miles since leaving the fort. Fires were kindled, the river-bank supplying plenty of fuel. Then arrangements were made for passing the night; the wagons were drawn up in a semicircle, the ends of which rested on the river-bank; the beasts of burden were unharnessed and brought within the circle—a wise precaution, for the first attempt on the part of the Indians in an attack is always to stampede the cattle. These once dispersed and scattered over the prairie, the emigrants, of course, can not advance or retreat, and if the savages are unsuccessful in their attack on the wagons and are beaten off, at least they have the satisfaction of gathering in the stampeded stock.

The wagon-train "packed," the next movement of the guides was to throw out pickets and divide the men into "watches" for the night. Arms were looked to and all preparations made to resist a night attack. Instructions were given to the pickets, who were relieved every two hours, to fire their rifles at the slightest alarm. The guides slept by turns, and one was always on the alert, passing from picket to picket, noiselessly as a panther, and ever and anon gliding like a ghost through the darkness of the prairie beyond the picket-line, watching to detect the presence of the foe.

The night passed slowly away without a single signal of danger.

As the first gray streaks of dawn began to ap-

pear, Abe, returning from a prolonged scout on the prairie, met Dave, who had just awoke from an hour's nap.

"Well, any sign?"

"Nary sign. Thar hain't been a red devil within a mile of us last night, I'll bet," replied Abe.

"Can they have thought we were too strong for them and given us up?"

"No, I don't think that," responded Abe, thoughtfully. "I tell you, this 'White Vulture' is just as smart as they make 'em. He knows that we, of course, suspect that an attack would be made, 'cos we saw him. Now, of course, he knows that we'll be on our guard ag'in' the attack; so he just waits; he lets two or threedays go by; we don't see any Injun sign; we git careless—don't keep up our watch—don't look for an attack—an' then he comes down onto us like a panther, claws an' all. Two days more, at the rate we are going at, will bring us to where the trail crosses the Yellowstone an' strikes off to the north-west to Codotte's Pass. Wal, now, in 'bout three days, when we're between the Yellowstone an' the Missouri, heading for the Missouri, he'll go for us."

"There is sense in what you say," said Dave.

"Sartain, I'm a nigger if thar ain't; but though I think I've got the Injun's plan down to a pint, I ain't a-going to be caught napping afore we leave the Yellowstone, 'cos he may go for us at any moment; therefore I shall keep my eyes open."

Breakfast was prepared, and the emigrants, after partaking of it, again took up their line of march.

We will now return to the "White Vulture" we left flying for his life across the prairie. Mounted on the milk-white steed, that was indeed a horse of matchless action, he crossed the Yellowstone and rode in a south-western direction. His way lay across a rolling prairie dotted here and there with little clumps of timber. Ever and anon he turned in his saddle and listened for the sounds of pursuit. Satisfied at last that no one was on his trail, he drew rein beside one of the little clumps of timber; dismounted, tethered his horse to a stunted oak, then taking from his pouch some dried buffalo-meat, cured in the sun, he made a scanty meal, then after a careful scout around his immediate neighborhood, he laid himself down upon the prairie and slept. The white steed, that had evidently been reared among the Indians and understood their customs, slept calmly by the side of his master.

As the first cold gray streaks of light appeared in the east, the Indian chief awoke, mounted his horse and rode off, this time shaping his course almost directly west. On he rode, from the early dawn until the sun's warm rays showed the noon at hand; then he halted by the side of a little hollow in the prairie from which a spring gushed forth, gave his horse water, partook again of the buffalo-meat, let his horse graze for an hour or so on the fresh young grass and then again pursued his way.

Two hours more of hard riding brought the "White Vulture" to the bank of the Big Horn river, to an Indian encampment.

Some hundred warriors of the Crow nation had there tethered their horses, while the braves themselves lay upon the grass, or walked listlessly up and down by the turbid stream, now swollen high by the spring rains.

From the fact that no squaws were with the party, nor lodges, nor dogs—those usual accompaniments to stationary Indian encampments—one acquainted with their customs would instantly have pronounced them on the war-path. Any further evidence was wanted, the gayly-painted faces of the warriors, bedecked with crimson, yellow, black and white tints in all the hideous fashions of the savages when on the war-trail, would have confirmed it.

The "White Vulture" dismounted from his horse, tied him to a shrub, and with stately steps walked to the river's bank, where, under the shade of an oak tree, sat ten warriors, evidently the principal chiefs of the party. The "White Vulture" sat down in the circle.

"My brother is late," said an old chief, who was known among the Crows as the "Thunder-Cloud," probably from his dark color; he was one of the oldest and best warriors in all the Crow nation.

"Yet the 'White Vulture's' horse is like the wind; he could not come before."

"Has the great chief been on the war-trail?" asked another brave.

"The 'White Vulture' has been to the lodges of the blue-coated whites, on the Powder river; he has seen the white wagons start for the great mountains. If his brothers will open their ears the 'White Vulture' will speak."

Then the chief gave a detailed account of his visit to Fort Bent, and what had occurred there. When he spoke of the riches of the emigrant wagons, the eyes of the Indians sparkled with greed; but when he spoke of the number of fighting men attached to the train, their brows grew dark, and when he told them that the famous Indian-fighter, the terror of all their nation, the dreaded "Crow-Killer" was with the train, their faces showed their disappointment and their unwillingness to encounter the old guide.

After the "White Vulture" had finished his story, there was silence in the Indian council. To tell the truth, they feared to attack the train. They had sent some thirty of their warriors with the two wagons of furs captured from the trappers to their chief village, which was situated on the head-waters of the Missouri, near the base of the Rocky Mountains.

"My brothers are silent," said the "White Vulture," a perceptible sneer curling his lip; "will they attack the white wagons, or will they fly from the 'Crow-Killer,' like the hawk from the eagle? Will they yield their hunting-grounds to the tread of the white man's foot, or will they fight and die like warriors for what is their own?"

The braves looked at the bold speaker. No one in the circle could gainsay the caution or the prowess of the "White Vulture." At length one of the braves spoke:

"The 'Crow-Killer' is a devil; the Great Spirit watches over his life."

Then the "White Vulture" told of his encounter with the "Crow-Killer"; he had not related it before. The chiefs listened attentively. At last, after a long deliberation they determined to attack the train, and invested the "White Vulture" with supreme command of the expedition; hitherto he had shared it with two others.

The "White Vulture" gave the order for the band to move, and in a few minutes the warriors were in the saddle. The whole party crossed the Big Horn river and rode slowly off in a north-western direction, that in time would bring them to the Yellowstone river.

The old chief, "Thunder-Cloud," rode by the side of the "White Vulture."

"The 'White Vulture' felt the grasp of the 'Crow-Killer'?" he asked.

"Yes; his arms are like the cak; they twined around the 'White Vulture' like the snake around the bird."

"Yet the 'White Vulture' did not lose his scalp to the 'Crow-Killer'?"

"The chief remembered the words of his father, the 'Rolling Cloud.' He told his son that if he ever met the 'Crow-Killer,' and was in danger from him, to say that he was the son of 'Little Star.'"

"Did my brother say so?"

"Yes."

"And the 'Crow-Killer'?" questioned the old chief.

"He started as if he had been struck by the forked light of the Great Spirit; his arms lost their strength; the 'White Vulture' escaped from them and came back to his brothers; the charm was good."

Then as they rode on, the "White Vulture" told the old chief of the beautiful pale-face girl, whose hair was the color of the red metal that the Blackfeet sometimes found in the sands of the mountain streams and molded into bullets—bullets with which they had slain many a brave chief of the Crow nation—how her eyes in color were like the lodge of the Great Spirit above, and as soft as the eyes of the deer.

"My brother would take the white singing-bird to his wigwam," said the old chief; "it is good; she shall rear young braves, that in moons will be great warriors of our tribe, for the 'White Vulture' is the great fighting-man of the Crow nation."

And so onward rode the Crow warriors on the war-trail.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE AGAINST EIGHT.

'Twas the third afternoon after their leaving Fort Bent that we again visit the emigrant train.

Although, as yet, Abe had seen nothing to warrant the supposition that Indians were near at hand, yet somehow he felt assured that such was the case; the old Indian-fighter had lived too long in the Indian country and knew their ways too well for him to feel safe after seeing the "White Vulture" at the fort.

The train moved slowly; the horse of the "White Vulture" was fleet; he could easily have joined the warriors and led them back to

the attack, during the time the train had been on the march from Fort Bent.

The wagons had just started from their noon rest; this was their last day's march by the Yellowstone; they would camp that night by the side of the river, and in the morning turn northward toward the Missouri.

The old hunter had thought the matter over carefully; he was convinced that the Indians were not before but behind him, probably following on his trail. To test the truth of this, all the morning he had lagged behind, leaving the train in the care of Dave. At one time he had been at least a mile behind the rest, offering a tempting opportunity to the trailing savages to swoop down upon and capture him, which might seem to them an easy task, but would have been in reality a hard and difficult one, as the guide was well armed and mounted on a roan horse of great speed and endurance. But somehow, if there were savages in the rear as the scout expected, they did not take advantage of the opportunity to capture the famous "Crow-Killer." This was a puzzle to the old Indian-fighter; he pored over the fact; he could not account for it. Finally, an idea struck him; his face brightened up, and he drew a long breath of relief.

"What a cursed fool I've been!" he cried to himself, slapping his thigh vigorously as he rode along behind the train. "That's brains at the bottom of it, in course! If they went for me, naterally I'd make a fight—a noise, and alarm the train; their idea is not to alarm us, but come down suddenly, an' bag us all like a blessed lot of turkeys—this is, if we let them do it. Why, I mought 'a' knowed that, if I had as much sense as a yaller dog. That's the identical idea, blamed if it ain't." And then the old hunter chuckled to himself. "Guess I mought as well interfere in that air little arrangement. I ain't had a skirmish for some time, an' I mought as well get my hand in. I mought as well tell Dave what I'm up to." So, patting the gallant roan on the neck, he urged her forward, passed the train and joined Dave, who was riding on ahead, keeping a sharp look-out upon the country before him.

The two canvassed matters for awhile, when Dave said:

"But, are you sure, Abe, that there are Injuns back of us, on our trail? They may be on the other side of the river, or ahead between us and the Missouri."

"You talk reason, Dave, but did you notice, jest after we started this morning, we roused a little flock of ducks out of the Yellowstone?" asked the "Crow-Killer."

"Yes, I did notice it."

"Wal, I was behind the train, an' I noticed that after we passed, the ducks settled back again to the river. Wal, 'bout half an hour arterwards that same flock of ducks flew over our heads, going to the north-west. Wal—whatever disturbed those ducks were about half an hour behind us, or, say, in distance 'bout four miles. Now, when we disturbed the ducks they flew up an' then flew back, but this time they flew off. That convinces me that they were disturbed by a large party of Injuns, perhaps shot at by them with arrows. What do you think?"

"I think you are right, Abe, and probably to-night we shall be attacked," replied Dave, his eyes growing earnest in their look and his brows contracting as he thought of the danger to which his beloved Leona must soon be exposed.

"Wal, Dave, I ain't fit Injuns since I were knee-high to a grasshopper for nothing, an' I intend to find out whether my guess is true or not."

"What are you going to do?"

"The Injuns haven't let me see them because they have seen me, that's the idea. They have probably got one or two on ahead as sort of scouts, an' then the main body follers in the rear, so as not to tumble on us in case we happen to stop suddenly. The chief in command, who is probably the 'White Vulture,' is holding 'em back so as to surprise us at the right time. Now, I'm goin' to drop back an' not let 'em see me. I'll jist dismount, tie old roan here behind some bushes to hide her, lay low in the grass until Mr. Injun comes along, for of course he will come, having nothing to excite his suspicions; then I'll jist pop him over, take his scalp-lock an' leave him as a warning to the rest of the red devils."

"But, suppose there should be two or three in the advance?"

"Wal, I've got six shots in this 'ere revolver of mine, an' I guess I could even settle for an' get away from 'em. I'll leave my rifle on

the roan, so in case they push me hard I'll have another shot. Jist you keep on with the train, camp at the bend where we camped last trip. Don't be alarmed for me. If I don't come back, carry the train on to Montana, conclude that these durned Crows have wiped me out at last, an' jist settle the account with them whenever you meet them."

So, with a hearty pressure of Dave's hand, the "Crow-Killer" turned his horse off one side and let the train pass him.

The wagon soon rolled by; then the "Crow-Killer," selecting a little thicket on the river's bank, dismounted and hid himself and horse behind it. He tied his rifle on the saddle so that he could easily free it, then examined the charges of his revolver, loosened his bowie-knife in its sheath, and being prepared for the coming fight, coolly extended himself at full length upon the grass, having first arranged the bushes before him so as to command a view down the river.

The minutes flew rapidly; no sign of any Indians yet. The old hunter grew a little impatient.

"Consarn 'em!" he muttered, "why don't they come? Pears to me they're acting dreadful cautious. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by something moving on the prairie far in the distance.

The hunter watched it attentively; it was too distant for him to distinguish distinctly what it was.

"Looks like a horse," said Abe. "Tain't possible, though, 'cos if it were a stray horse, the Injuns would have gobbled it up long ago. I shall soon know, at any rate."

Then the animal, coming on at a rapid pace, mounted one of the distant swells of the prairie and proved to be a large wolf. He came rapidly on, and at quite a distance scented the hunter and gave him a wide berth, sheering off to the north-west.

"Wonder if he wasn't frightened by the Injuns, now?" questioned the hunter to himself; "spect he was. Sho! what's that?"

A little flock of ducks came flying over his head from down the river, evidently alarmed at something.

"That's Injun sign, sure," chuckled the "Crow-Killer," and he again examined his revolver, making sure that the caps were down firm on the nipples.

"Now, then, old roan, I guess you and me 'll have a fight afore we're an hour older," said the hunter, addressing his horse as if he had been a human.

Far in the distance Abe could discern two mounted figures; they were approaching but slowly; but as they came on, the keen eyes of the scout could see that they were Indians.

"I was right! The White Vulture is a smart feller for an Injun, but he ain't the match for the 'Crow-Killer' yet. Let me see; that's two of them to settle. I wonder if they'll be within revolver range 'fore they spy me? Guess they will. Hello! that's another red-skin ahead on foot." And in truth, there strode a stalwart warrior a couple of hundred yards before the others; he was evidently the advanced scout.

"Three!" cried the "Crow-Killer," "wal—the more the merrier. I guess I'm good for 'em."

The single Indian in advance was coming on with a long, tireless stride, his eager eyes fixed upon the wagon-trail imprinted on the prairie-grass before him. Then behind the single savage on foot and the two mounted ones, the hunter saw five more Crows on horseback. A low whistle escaped from the lips of the Indian-fighter as he beheld the new-comers.

"Sho! that's a heap onto 'em; guess I'll have to make a runnin' fight; eight ag'in' one—tall odds even for the 'Crow-Killer.' Hello! that's the 'White Vulture' on his hoss—same thing, 'cos of course he's on his back." And as the hunter had said, at the head of the last five Indians rode the "White Vulture," mounted on the milk-white steed.

The "Crow-Killer" thought over his plan of action and speedily decided what to do. Little time for thinking had he, for the Indian on foot was even now within rifle range; and his long, loping stride carried him rapidly forward. He was a thick-set, muscular young brave, brawny-chested, but with the misshapen lower limbs peculiar to all the "Horse Indians," who, from infancy, spend nearly all their lives on horseback, and rarely use their legs for locomotion, unless in some case like the present, where, in trailing a foe, there was much less chance of being detected by that foe on foot than on the back of a steed.

The face of the young brave was gayly decked

with the war-paint, as was also his bare breast. In his hand he carried a short carbine, such as are carried by the United States troops. It was evidently a trophy of victory wrested from the "blue-coated chiefs," as the Indians generally designate the soldiers who wear the blue of Uncle Sam.

The sight of the carbine raised the old hunter's anger.

"Guess, afore long, I'll fix you so you won't steal any more carbines!" muttered the "Crow-Killer," as raising his revolver, he "drew a bead" on the savage, who still came rapidly on, unconscious of his danger.

"I'll plug him, then I'll mount old roan and go for the rest. Arter he's out of the way 'twill only be seven ag'in' one. I'll teach 'em to foller my trail, the red skunks, durn 'em!"

A moment the old hunter glanced along the shining tube, then a motion of his finger—crack! the sharp report of the revolver rung out on the stillness of the prairie—the savage stopped, trembled, clutched his breast with his hand convulsively and then fell forward on his face, dead—shot through the heart.

"Another Crow gone to kingdom come!" the guide muttered, coolly recharging the empty chamber of his revolver.

The two mounted Indians, seeing the fall of their comrade, hearing the sharp, whip-like crack of the revolver, and detecting the little puff of white smoke that curled upward from the ambush of the guide and floated lazily on the air above his head, instantly paused, then in a second flung themselves from their horses' backs into the prairie-grass, where they nestled like so many snakes watching for their foe; their well-trained horses stood motionless. The party of five behind, who had also seen the fall of the foremost savage, quitted the backs of their horses and joined the two Indians concealed in the grass.

"Durn 'em!" ejaculated the hunter, "do they think that my rifle will carry to all creation?" for the Indians were far beyond rifle-range.

For some ten minutes there were no signs of life upon the prairie; the hunter remained motionless in his covert, watching for some movement upon the part of his foe, and the Indians remained quiet, their horses taking advantage of the occasion to graze upon the fresh young prairie-grass.

"What are they up to? Some deviltry, I'll bet," said the guide to himself. Gosh! if they don't make some movement soon, I shall have to, for the whole b'ilin' of 'em will be up presently, an' I don't calculate to fight a hundred of them all to onc't. Hello! the fun's commenced." This remark was occasioned by the singular behavior of one of the Indian horses. As said, the animals had been feeding quietly upon the grass, but now one of the horses detached itself from the rest and proceeded to walk slowly away, taking a course that would describe a semicircle around the "Crow-Killer."

He had fought the Indians too long to be deceived by this, one of the most common of their tricks. He knew that clinging to the horse and hid by the body of the animal was one of the Crow warriors. Indeed, his keen eyes, trained from infancy to prairie-life, and possessing a range of vision wonderful in its extent, could detect the red band of the warrior where it clung to the horse's mane, and the end of the foot of the Indian on the horse's back.

The trapper and his horse were concealed from the view of the savages by a little clump of timber in the shape of a crescent, the ends of which rested on the river, so that when the Indian, concealed behind the horse, got abreast of the place where the guide was concealed, he was none the wiser regarding the hidden foe who had slain his comrade. The Indian behind the horse described a complete semicircle around the hiding-place of the "Crow-Killer," and took a position just beyond rifle-range, by the river's bank above him. Then the same maneuver was executed by three other savages, except that the first savage of the three stopped his horse within a few hundred yards of the Indian by the river's bank, the second savage a few hundred yards from him, and the third Indian a few hundred yards from the second, so that by this maneuver the "Crow-Killer" was completely encircled on three sides by the Crows. The Yellowstone, there rapid and deep, cut off his escape on the only side left unguarded by the Indians.

"Wal, Abe, you're in for it!" soliloquized the guide; "the red devils kinder think that they've got their beaver. If they'd only come within range, I'd pick 'em off one by one, but they ain't a-goin' to do that. Jerusalem! I've got to git out o' this or they'll lift my har for me;

the rest of the red suckers will be up pooty soon; then they'll make a dash an' close in onto me. I mought kill a few onto 'em, but in the end they'd wipe me out sart'in, an' I don't cal'late to let 'em do that just yet. Hello, durned if they ain't beginnin' to close in on me already."

"Now for it!" thought Abe, as he slid his revolver into his belt, and rising from his lying attitude in the bushes, he stole cautiously to his horse's side, unfastened her, loosened the rifle, quietly mounted; then gathering the reins in a little knot, patted the roan on the neck, shut his teeth firmly, touched the mare in the flank with his heels, and dashed through the covert of the bushes upon the open prairie. Rifle in hand, and urging his horse to its highest speed, he rode straight for the Indian before him, disregarding the two savages above and the four below him, one of whom was the "White Vulture."

The Indian before the "Crow-Killer," as he came dashing on, leveled his carbine from under his horse's neck and fired. The aim was false, however, for the ball went wide of the guide; then he urged his horse forward in a course parallel with the river, attempting to keep the body of it still between him and the hunter and escape.

The other savages, swinging themselves into their saddles, came rapidly on toward the "Crow-Killer," encircling him on all sides. Some of them below him had made a wide detour from the river so as to head him off if he succeeded in killing or escaping the savage before him. But the "Crow-Killer" had a plan, and soon he put it into execution. He gained every moment upon the savage before him. The red brave rode for life, expecting every moment to hear the sharp crack of the white man's rifle and feel the deadly ball. Wildly he urged his mustang onward, but the roan mare of the "Crow-Killer" was fleet far, and steadily, foot by foot, the hunter gained upon him. The Indians on both sides of the guide, from the course they were taking, gained also upon their foe, and soon were so nearly within range that they opened fire upon him. The balls whistled through the air, but all fell short.

The "Crow-Killer" gave a quick glance to his left up the river. There were but two Indians between him and the train. The time for escape had come. Both Indians were within range. Quick as thought he turned in the saddle, leveled at the nearest chief and fired; the savage perceived the motion, attempted to shield himself behind his horse, but too late; the ball struck him in the shoulder and hurled him out of the saddle to the ground. Then the guide wheeled the gallant roan to the left and rode full tilt at the remaining red-skin between him and freedom. The Indian, sheering off to the north, brought his gun to his shoulder and fired; the scout had perceived the motion, and swerved his horse to the left a little; the ball cut through the hunting-shirt, just grazing the shoulder. With a yell of defiance the guide drew his revolver, leveled at the Indian, who was now almost within point-blank range, and fired. The Crow, perceiving the intention of the white man, pulled up the head of his horse, who received the ball in his temple and fell over on his side dead, almost crushing the rider in his fall. The wily savage by the action saved his life.

Over the prairie went the "Crow-Killer," urging the tireless roan to her topmost speed; behind him came the Indians, wild with rage, but they had lost ground by the cunning maneuver of the "Crow-Killer," and he gained on them every moment. One horse alone of the party was the equal of the roan in speed, and that horse was ridden by the "White Vulture," but he did not pursue the dreaded "Crow-Killer," being far in the rear. Great brave though he was, he may have feared to encounter the enemy of his tribe, or perhaps he remembered that the "Crow-Killer" had spared his life, and thus he returned the favor.

After a sharp pursuit the guide had the satisfaction of beholding the Crows rein in their horses and give up the chase.

"Wal, considerin' that it were one ag'in' eight, I hain't made a bad fight," said the "Crow-Killer," as he rode on up the bank of the Yellowstone.

CHAPTER VII

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

The train had reached the bend in the river where Abe had decided to camp, and was preparing supper when the guide overtook them.

The emigrants had heard the shots, and, under Dave's direction, had prepared for attack.

The "Crow-Killer" was surrounded by eager questioners when he dismounted.

In a few words he told the emigrants that they were in danger of an attack every moment, but that beyond a doubt they could easily beat off the savages. The old guide was a shrewd judge of human nature; by the time he got through his little speech, he had fully persuaded his companions that they were more than a match for the Indians. So the emigrants partook of their supper cheerfully, and then made preparations for the night.

The Hickmans, father and son, were talking earnestly apart from the rest.

"Well, father," asked Dick, "have you decided what to do?"

"Yes," answered the old man, "I'll fix it to-night. We have got to get her from the wagon some way, for we can never attempt to put her out of the way with Mrs. Grierson and her daughter with her in the wagon. We must think of some plan to get her out."

"I've got an idea. The guides, you know, say that we'll be attacked to-night. Now, the moment the Indians commence the attack, I'll set fire to the wagon-covering; I'll wet it first with whisky, then it will burn like mad; of course the women will be frightened out; then you'll have a chance to fix Miss Leona. What do you think of the idea?" asked the son.

"There couldn't be any thing better," replied the father, rubbing his hands with delight.

"Well, tain't a bad idea, and it's very simple; so you just keep your eyes open and watch your chance."

"All right," replied old Eben, "I shall look out."

And then the devil's pair, father and son, mingled in one of the little groups near the fires.

The shades of night gathered over the prairie; the pickets were posted, and the cattle corralled in the center of the little circle formed by the wagons and the river.

Anxious hearts were in the camp that night. Many a cheek lost its ruddy hue and paled as the owner thought of the danger that, like a dark cloud, hovered over them. Miles were they away from home and friends, surrounded by the red fiends thirsting for the blood of the "pale-faces." Many a prayer went up to Heaven from white lips, that the Great Power above would protect them and guide them safe to their far western home.

The night wore on; no signs of danger had yet been seen, even by the keen-eyed guides.

"What do you think, Abe?" asked Dave, as the two stood together, beyond the picket-line on the eastern side of the camp, watching the prairie before them. The night was dark and the moon shone not over the prairie.

"What do I think? Wal, I think that in less than an hour we'll have the toughest fight that we've been in for many a long day," replied the "Crow-Killer."

"You think so?" asked Dave, anxiously. His thoughts were of Leona.

"Sart'in!" responded the old guide; "the Crows mean mischief, or else I'm a sucker!"

Just then the prolonged yell of a coyote sounded faintly in the distance over the prairie.

"Do you hear that?" cried Abe, in a whisper, clutching the arm of Dave, nervously.

"Yes, it's a wolf, attracted probably by the scent of our camp," replied Dave.

"Just so," said Abe, still in a hoarse whisper, a singular expression upon his features.

The sound had come from the east, seemingly down the river.

"I shouldn't be surprised if thar were more nor one wolf," said Abe, listening intently.

"Why, yes, of course," replied Dave, "they generally go in packs."

Just then another howl was borne faintly to their ears on the night wind, this time coming from the north.

"Do you hear that?" asked Abe; "that wolf travels considerably fast; he's made 'bout three miles in two seconds; shouldn't be surprised if next time he howls it should come from the westward," and then, as if in confirmation of the guide's words, the howl was repeated, and this time it did come from the west.

"Pears to me," said Abe, in his shrewd way, "that those wolves are acting all together, and they're howling to let each other know whar they air."

"We are surrounded by them!" cried Dave.

"Gospel truth, an' every one of those 'are wolves is a big Crow Injun!" said the "Crow-Killer."

"I believe you're right!" exclaimed Dave.

"I know I am. They're closin' in upon us; we'll have a bloody work afore we're an hour older, or else I'm a sucker. Let's take a leetle

scout down by the river; they're all on horse-back, an' by keeping to the little timber, we can easily avoid them; they won't be apt to attack for an hour or so yet, an' if we run into 'em an' have a leetle tussle, why, I guess we can git out of it, an' at any rate it'll give the camp fair warning an' spoil the Injuns' idea to surprise us."

So, noiselessly the two guides stole down along the river, keeping close watch before them for the advancing Indians. We will leave them to pursue their scout and return to the camp of the emigrants.

It was half an hour after the departure of the two guides on their scout that the two Hickmans stood together, near the wagon that contained Grierson's family and Leona.

"Look here, father," said Dick. "I go on picket up the river in about ten minutes; there isn't any danger of an attack. I don't believe there's an Indian within ten miles of us, so that idea of ours won't work."

"What shall we do then?" asked the father.

"I'll tell you. After I go on the picket, you go to the wagon and ask Leona if she don't want to go out for a walk as far as where Dave Reed is on duty. Tell her that the guides are convinced there isn't any danger and he'd like to say good-night to her before she goes to sleep. She'll jump at the chance; then you just take her up the river, past my post, and I'll contrive not to see you when you go by me. Now when you get her a couple of yards beyond where I am, you suddenly shout 'Indians!' and rush back to the camp. I'm on picket-duty, and of course if I hear an alarm and see anybody coming in I shall think it's an Indian and fire at it. Then I'll put for camp, and when in the morning they find her dead, why, it will be an unfortunate mistake—that's all." And the scoundrel told the details of the infernal plot against the life of the orphan girl with perfect coolness.

"But, suppose they accuse us of intending to kill her?" said the old man.

"Who will dare to? who will have reason to? We are all strangers to each other; no one will know that there is a motive for the deed. Men don't commit crimes for nothing, you know. It will be set down by all as a blunder, not a premeditated act. It's the most natural thing in the world for me, after you give the alarm, to fire at the first thing that approaches me."

"Yes," said the old man, convinced that the scheme was a good one. "Be careful; don't make a mistake and hit me in the darkness."

"Oh, no!" cried the son, "you just keep near the river; you can easily run faster than she can."

And so the plot was arranged.

The pickets were relieved and Dick Hickman took his post to the west of the camp by the river. Then the Older Hickman went to the wagon that contained Leona. The poor girl had not thought of sleep; she was too anxious for the safety of her lover. She accepted the invitation to go out to Dave's post with gladness, and the assurance of the old villain that all danger was over, relieved her mind of a heavy load.

Eben Hickman and Leona, passed beyond the wagon-line, and walked into the darkness of the prairie. Dick at his post saw them coming and laid down flat on the ground, so that he would escape Leona's notice.

Old Hickman and Leona passed on beyond the picket-line and walked a hundred yards or so out on the prairie.

"Are we near his post?" asked Leona, the dense gloom and stillness of the prairie waste striking a dread fear to her heart.

"Yes, just beyond us," answered the man, "don't you see him?" and he pointed before them in the darkness.

Leona strained her eyes and gazed through the gloom.

"Yes," she said after a moment's anxious gaze, "I see him now," and then, with a light heart, she was about to proceed, when Hickman laid his hand upon her arm; she could feel that he was trembling violently.

"You see him? where?" and the voice of the old man trembled with fear.

"There!" she answered, pointing straight before her. "Don't you see those forms in the darkness?—there are three or four with him, and some on horseback!"

"My God!" shrieked the old man, in terror, "the Indians!" and then he would have turned to fly, but the red warriors swooped down upon them; with a lightning stroke a savage cleft his head with a tomahawk, and struck him dead to the ground. Another grim warrior, bending

from the saddle, seized the almost fainting Leona in his arms, and raising her held the maiden before him. Her screams rung shrill on the night-air; then came the quick reports of shots fired to the eastward of the camp; 'twas the signal for the attack. The picket-guards fired their rifles, then ran for the wagon train.

Dick Hickman heard the exclamation of his father and the scream of the girl, but first thought it was only the execution of the plan contrived; then he heard the rush of the Indians and the struggle attending the killing of his father, and realizing that the Indians had come in reality, he fled hastily for the camp.

The attack had now begun in downright earnest. Abe and Dave had scouted down the bank of the river until they detected the advancing Indians, then skillfully withdrawing without being observed, they had returned and alarmed the camp, so that when the Crows made their dash, intended for a complete surprise, to their astonishment they found the emigrants fully prepared to receive them.

The Indians, contrary to their wonted custom, dashed in among the wagons, and fought the emigrants hand to hand. The contest was long and bloody, but the whites were fighting for all that was dear to them in the world, and made a most desperate resistance. Being, too, armed far superior to the Indians, gave them an advantage, though outnumbered. Their revolvers did terrible service, thinning the ranks of the Crows with dreadful effect. The emigrants, too, had the advantage of the cover of the wagons. Abe and Dave fought like demons. The Indians gave way before the two guides, who, on horseback, wielding their heavy rifles like reeds, brought the butts of them down with terrible effect upon the heads of the red assailants. The "White Vulture" led on the Crows with desperate bravery, but, at last, the Indians, having lost nearly a third of their forces, reluctantly drew off and left the emigrants in possession of the field.

It was a hard-earned victory, for six of the emigrants had been killed outright, and hardly a man escaped without some wound.

Abe and Dave instantly exerted themselves to place the camp again in a proper state of defense.

The old Indian-fighter knew full well that the Crows, though defeated for the present, might renew the attack at any moment.

The bodies of the slain Indians were rolled into the river; the emigrants, killed in the fight, were placed in a wagon until they could be given decent burial.

"A tough fight, Abe," said Grierson, who had manfully done his part in the struggle.

"What will be the next movement do you suppose?" asked an emigrant.

"Wal, I s'pect they'll kinder hem us in here, an' try an' starve us out," said Abe.

"They can't do that," cried Grierson, "we have plenty of provisions."

"For us, yes," answered the "Crow Killer," "but for the cattle, no. The four-footed beasts will want fodder, an' if we drive 'em outside our wagon-line, we've got to fight for it."

"Then how to feed the cattle is the question," said Grierson.

"That's so, an' that's jist what the red-skunks are call'ating on. If they'd only stampeded our beasts last night, they'd had us."

"That was the reason that you had 'em tied so securely," broke in an emigrant.

"Sartin'; now you're talkin'. We've got to stand a siege here, I reckon," said Abe.

The gray streaks of the coming day were now seen in the eastern clouds, and the dense gloom vanished rapidly from the face of the prairie.

Abe divided the camp into watches, as before, attended in person to the wounded men, and imposed watchfulness upon the guards.

As the morning advanced, the emigrants looked out with anxious eyes for traces of the foe.

Far beyond rifle-range on the prairie, the Crows had formed a cordon of men around the camp of the emigrants, so as to cut off all hope of escape.

Abe looked at them with an evil expression in his dark eyes.

"If I don't wipe out some of your big chiefs afore I'm a day older, then I'm a sucker," and he shook his fist savagely toward the foe.

Abe then directed the breakfast to be prepared.

"We can't fight unless we eat, and thank gracious, we've got enough for the humans if we haven't for the beasts."

So the women went busily to work getting the breakfast. Then, for the first time, the absence of Leona was discovered. Of course, Mrs.

Grierson and Eunice had noticed her absence from the wagon, but thought she had taken refuge in some other one, but now it was discovered that she was not in the camp!

Dave was excited and alarmed.

Abe, in his cool way, inquired all the particulars of the affair. Eunice, awake when Leona had left the wagon, of course knew that she had left it with the elder Hickman, for the purpose of seeing Dave. Inquiry was then made for Hickman, and he was announced among the missing. Dick, the son, was questioned, but he professed ignorance of his father's fate. Leona and his father both dead, he was the sole heir to Rattlesnake Gulch; so he determined to hold his tongue, and thus avoid unpleasant questions.

But one conclusion could be drawn, and that was that possibly the elder Hickman had taken Leona, ventured beyond the picket-line, and fallen into the hands of the savages.

"Well?" said Dave, in a calm voice, though his lips trembled as he spoke. Dave and Abe had walked off together.

"Dave, boy, your gal's in the hands of the Crows; thar ain't any mistake 'bout it. That cussed fool Hickman took her out onto the prairie, an' both on 'em got gobbled up;" and the "Crow-Killer's" face, more than his words, expressed the grief he felt in his friend's loss.

"Abe," said Dave, in a tone of earnest determination, "I'll rescue her, if she's alive, from the hands of the Crows, or if she's dead, I'll avenge her!"

"An' I'm with you, boy, to the death!" cried the "Crow-Killer," extending his hand. A moment the two men grasped each other's hands; 'twas a solemn compact, and from that time the Crow nation had two unrelenting enemies instead of one.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SCOUTING EXPEDITION.

AFTER the emigrants had partaken of their breakfast, Abe thought of a plan to give the beasts something to eat; the grass within the little camp had long since disappeared, but outside of the wagon-line there was plenty. The question was how to protect the cattle from the Indians while they grazed.

Abe directed a passage-way to be made by pulling two of the wagons apart; then he dispatched five of the cattle at a time to feed, while he, Dave and Grierson, who was an excellent shot, mounted and rode on before the cattle. The first five cattle that went out, the Crows made a dash for, but Abe, the moment they got within range, shot the first in the shoulder and checked the advance, the rifles of the whites having so much greater carrying powers than the guns of the Indians, gave them a decided advantage.

Then the Crows tried their favorite maneuver of hiding themselves behind their horses, riding by at full speed and firing at the cattle. The whites speedily stopped that by shooting the Indian horses, and after the Crows had lost three animals they gave up the attempt, and left the beasts of the emigrants to eat in quiet.

"Wal, thar's another idea of the red-skinks blocked," cried Abe. "I guess they won't starve either us or our cattle."

"But we can not advance," said Grierson, "while they surround us."

"Of course not," replied Abe; "but they'll get tired of squatting down out thar an' watching us, 'fore long, see if they don't. Another pint, I ain't a-goin' to stay quiet hyar an' let 'em alone. 'Fore long, I'll worry 'em a little, see if I don't."

And so, after all the cattle were fed, Abe and Dave held a private consultation.

"Dave," said the "Crow-Killer," "I think I'll take a little scout out among the Crows an' see what they are arter."

"Shall I go with you?" asked Dave.

"No, you remain hyar in command of the train, but, arter I'm gone, if the Crows on the north and east, don't appear to be up to any thing, you fust select a little party, say five or six good men, and ambush yourself, about half a mile beyond the bend, in the timber on the river-bank. I'm goin' to take advantage of the timber on the bank to walk into the Crow camp an' see what they're up to; an' when I've found out all I can an' git ready to leave, I'll fix things so as to lead some of the red devils right into your ambush."

"Be careful, Abe; don't run heedlessly into danger," said Dave.

"Sartin', I have the highest respect in the world for my top-knot, an' I ain't inclined to part with it yet. You bet, none of the painted sarpints get it without a big tussle. Another

thing I'm arter. I want to find out whether the little gal is alive or not. I s'pect, of course, that you want to find that out yourself, but, Dave, it's better that I should go. I know thar ain't any hope of snatching her out of the red-skinks' hands jist now; but I can find out, I guess, whether she's alive or dead. You know, Dave, thar isn't a man in the North-west that knows the Crows as well as I do. Are you willin' to stay behind, look arter the camp, an' let me go?" and the old Indian-fighter laid his hand kindly on the shoulder of the young guide as he spoke.

"Yes, Abe," said Dave, his voice choked with emotion; "you are right. It is better that you should go than I; for if I saw her in the hands of the red devils, I should do something, not only to endanger my own life, but hers. Go, therefore, in Heaven's name. I will faithfully obey all your instructions."

"That's jist as it ought to be," cried Abe, wringing his hand warmly. "All I've got to say is this: I'm going to take advantage of the timber to crawl up the bank of the river and sneak into their camp, for from what I saw on the prairie, I'm satisfied that their head-quarters is up the river. Now, it ain't likely that they'll keep a very strict guard, 'cos they've been fightin' all night, an' besides, they won't expect a visit. If I can only get near enough to hear their talk—you know I know the Crow language as well as I do my own—why then, I shall find out what they're goin' to do, an' perhaps what's goin' to become of the little gal. Jist you ambush your men 'bout half a mile above, an' lay low in the bushes till you see me. I'll lead some of the red imps right into your fire. That's all I've got for to say."

Then the guide went to the bank of the river, crawled under a wagon, and disappeared in the little thicket beyond.

Noiselessly and carefully Abe, the "Crow-Killer," threaded his way through the thicket, his ears ever on the alert to catch the slightest sound before him; his keen eyes piercing the dense wood, eager for a sight of the foe.

The line of savages was some three hundred yards from the camp. Abe, calculating that he must now be near it, proceeded onward with increased caution. In a few steps more he came to where the little thicket ended, and an open glade, perhaps a hundred feet in space, intervened; beyond that, the thicket commenced again; and on the grass by the thicket sat a Crow chief. He was evidently on the watch, and yet his watch was anything but strict. The savage did not dream of danger and sat lazily cutting the grass around him with his tomahawk, while his eyes were vacantly fixed upon the distant prairie.

To cross the open glade, so near the savage camp, was a dangerous task, but to cross it with the Indian sitting there on the watch was clearly an impossibility.

The old Indian-fighter surveyed the ground before him, long and earnestly.

"Jerusalem!" he muttered, "that durned red Injun is right in my track; if I could get by him, guess I could walk right into the Crow camp, without trouble, but how in creation am I to git across that glade! The cuss has got a carbine t'other side of him too. Fears to me, these Crows must have been making a raid on some of Uncle Sam's wagons. Oh! you long-legged red imp!" and he shook his fist at the unconscious savage, "I'd like to get hold of your top-knot."

"Wal," soliloquized the "Crow-Killer," "I can't cross the glade, that's sartin'; now let's see if I can't get round it some way."

First he looked to his right; before him was the open prairie; no hope there, of course. Then he looked to the left: there rolled the river. His eyes fell upon the little growth of timber on the opposite bank, which grew down to the edge the same as did that in which the hunter lay concealed.

"Thunder!" he cried, again communing with himself, "I mought have gone up on the other bank of the river, but then," and he thought the matter over carefully, "I should be as bad off as I am now, for I couldn't cross the river ag'in, without being seen any more than I can cross this glade. Jerusalem! whar are my ideas?" The guide racked his brains for a method to cross this hundred feet of open space guarded by the Indian. Just then the savage opened his mouth and indulged in a loud yawn.

"Oh! if he'd only go to sleep for jist two minutes, jist that long, an' I'd send him to kingdom come, quicker'n a wink."

But the savage, beyond yawning, evinced no desire or disposition to sleep.

The hunter bit his lips in desperation; his eyes wandering vacantly around, fell again upon the

opposite bank of the river. Suddenly a smile stole over his features; he had an idea how to cross the glade, or, if not to cross it, how, in military parlance, "to turn the enemy's position."

As we have said, the trees on the opposite side, as well as on the one on which the guide was hid, grew down to the edge of the bank; but, from the edge of the bank to the water of the river was at least six feet, the river being low; the washing of the rapid-rolling waters in time of the spring freshets and at other periods of high water had worn away the earth of the bank and tunneled it out to quite an extent underneath the brink.

"I've got it!" said the "Crow-Killer" in triumph; "if this 'ere bank is hollowed out underneath like t'other one, all I've got to do is to get down to the edge, get under the bank, and crawl along until I reach the timber again; the bank will hide me snug as can be."

So the "Crow-Killer" quietly withdrew from his position at the edge of the timber and wormed his way, snake-like, to the bank of the river. Then he carefully lowered himself off the bank into the soft clay earth fringed by the rolling waters.

Then noiselessly he crept along, bent almost double, under the overhanging bank.

The "Crow-Killer" safely accomplished his purpose, reached the timber on the other side of the glade without exciting the suspicions of the savage. The position of the enemy was turned.

The guide took the precaution to go some distance beyond the glade, before he left the shelter of the overhanging bank—that had so kindly shielded him—and took to the thicket.

"Pears to me," he said, musingly, "that I onc' hearn one of the sodgers at Fort Benton say that it was bad policy for an invading army to leave a strong post of the enemy in their rear. Now, as I suppose I stand fer the same as an invading army, it would be bad policy for me to let that 'ere Crow hold his position without a try to boost him out of it, 'cos if I should happen to get into any leetle difficulty beyond hyar, with the Crows, my only chance of escape is by this timber, 'cos, on the prairie, their horses would run me down, easy as fallin' off a log. Therefore, it's very clear to my mind that the first thing to be done is to put that Crow out of the way."

Through the timbers cautiously stole the guide; he was now approaching the Indian in the rear. He had formed so true a calculation of the spot upon which sat the Crow chief, that, after five minutes' continued progress he could distinguish the dusky figure on the outskirts of the timber.

"Thar's the red devil!" muttered the hunter. Just then he happened to step upon a dried twig, which snapped beneath his tread. Noiselessly and with the quickness of the lightning's flash, the "Crow-Killer" sunk at full length upon the ground.

The quick ear of the Indian caught the sound of the breaking twig, and he lazily turned his head in the direction of the noise. The action was prompted by curiosity only, not alarm, for he had no suspicion of danger; he looked for the foe before not behind him.

A moment or two the Indian kept his eyes fixed in the direction of the "Crow-Killer." All was still, however; no sound came from the little thicket.

The Indian, at last satisfied that the noise came from some little animal or bird within the thicket, again resumed his watch down the river.

"Wal," the "Crow-Killer" whispered, "that were a narrow escape. If that Injun had as much sense as a pig, he'd have found out what made that 'are noise. Bah! talk 'bout Injun sense and skill! Thar never were an Injun yet that could come up to a white man trained in their ways; they ain't got the head on their red bodies for to do it. A moment ago, I thought it were a difficult question to decide, whether he'd take my top-knot or I'd take his'n, but thar ain't any doubt 'bout it now; he's a gone sucker, as sure as my name's Abe."

Then drawing his keen-edged hunting-knife, with a stealthy step the old hunter crept upon his foe. The Indian, unconscious of danger, and wearied from the toil of last night's fight, sat upon the grass, idly reclining upon his elbow, his carbine by his side, his eyes fixed vacantly upon the open prairie.

With a spring like that of the panther leaping upon his prey, the old hunter sprang upon his foe, and while one broad hand, clutching the brawny throat of the savage, stifled his cries, the other drove the broad-bladed knife deep into

his bosom. A single convulsive movement of the savage's limbs, a stifled gasp in the throat, and the soul of the Crow chief had fled to the happy hunting-grounds. Another brave of the Crow nation had fallen by the hand of the Avenger.

A strange expression was in the eyes of the old "Crow-Killer" as he knelt by the side of the dead warrior.

"A young brave," he muttered, gazing on the features of the Crow—tinted with the gay war-paint—that a few moments before had been radiant with life, health and strength, yet now were rigid in death. "Probably this was his first expedition," he continued, "the first time that he has decked his face with the war-paint and gone on the war-trail ag'in the whites; yet I don't know that; the 'White Vulture' isn't much older than this chap, an' he has seen many a bloody fight. 'Tain't for nothing that they call him the 'greatest fighting man of the Crow nation.'"

The scout took another long look at the youthful features of the dead warrior, from the wound in whose breast the blood was streaming freely.

"It seems a pity to kill the red devils arter all; yet when I think of the wrong they have done me, cuss 'em!" and the guide shut his teeth together vindictively. "When I think of my father, dead, killed by these red dogs—when I think of my little Injun wife that they stole away from me, an' then, when I think of my two boys, my twin boys—if they had lived they'd have been about the age of this feller now—it makes me feel so bitter, that I really believe if I had the power I could wipe out the whole durned Crow nation, with as little remorse as I would feel for killin' a wolf. One of these days, I s'pect I'll find the truth about my wife and those twin babies. It makes me feel right bad sometimes, when I think that, maybe, the Crows didn't kill my two boys, but have reared 'em up an' made 'em Crow warriors, taught 'em to fight ag'in their father, an', some day, I may meet an' kill 'em or they me. I think I should know 'em though, 'cos they must look like the mother an' something like me." And then the old hunter was silent for a moment; then he took the body of the Indian, placed it carefully with its back against a tree, facing it toward the prairie.

"Thar," said Abe, "if any of the red skunks on the prairie pass by they'll think he's on his post, all right; they won't see that he's done for unless they come mighty close. Now then," he said, picking up his rifle from where he had laid it in the thicket, "now I think I can walk right into the Crow camp without any trouble; I must be careful, though, I don't stumble on 'em afore I know it, 'cos a fight is the last thing that I want to git into now."

CHAPTER IX.

THE CROWS IN COUNCIL.

THE "Crow-Killer" now made his way again to the river-bank, struck the stream at the place where he had left it, descended under the bank and then turned up the current—his footprints being in water, of course were soon washed from sight.

"Thar," he thought, with a sly chuckle, "I guess the Crows will have some difficulty to follow me. If they find the dead Injun, then they'll track me to the river an' then they'll be bothered. They won't think for a single moment that I've gone up-stream right into their camp, 'cos that's foolhardy, but, bless their stupid souls, the bold game is the one that wins in the long run. No, of course they'll imagine that I've gone down the river an' they won't dare to track me very far in that direction for fear of gettin' within range of our rifles. I think I've fooled 'em 'bout as cute as it can be done. They'll get sick of tackling the 'Crow-Killer' fore long, I reckon; if they don't, they're bigger fools than I take 'em to be."

So up the river, hid by the overhanging bank, cautiously went the "Crow-Killer." It was necessary to again ascend the bank in order to get within ear-shot of the Indians; but how to do it without leaving the marks of his feet upon the soft clay bank was a puzzle. Circumstances favored him. Right before him a stunted oak grew out of the bank and overhung the stream; grasping the trunk with his hands, light and quick as a cat, Abe lifted and swung himself up over the bank, his feet finding a resting-place on the bottom of the tree-trunk and thus leaving no mark.

The bank thus again gained, he plunged once more into the thicket.

After advancing a few steps, he heard the

sound of horses pawing the ground, a sure proof that he was near the camp.

Cautiously he stole forward a few steps more, when the thicket ended suddenly, and before him extended another little glade, not tenanted by a single savage as was the other, but by a score or more of the red braves. Extending himself flat on the ground, the guide, snake-like, wormed himself forward among the tangled underbrush, until he arrived at the very edge of the thicket, where he could not only command a full view of what was going on, but could hear nearly every word that was said. As he conjectured, he looked upon the main camp of the war-party.

On the prairie, close to the timber, the horses of the party, the wild Indian ponies, hardy and savage as their masters, the red chiefs, were tethered.

Some thirty warriors were in the little glade; the rest of the party, as the scout had surmised, were watching the camp of the emigrants.

All of the thirty warriors, excepting some eight, who appeared to the practiced eye of the "Crow-Killer" to be the principal chiefs, were scattered over the prairie edge of the little glade near the horses, nearly all reclining on the ground.

The eight chiefs, among whom was the "White Vulture," were seated near the middle of the glade in a circle, apparently holding a council. So the scout judged, and also that the council had just commenced, as the calumet, from which the smoke lazily curled, was being passed from mouth to mouth.

"Now then," thought the guide, "we'll see what the red devils are arter." Then his eyes wandered anxiously over the Indians near the horses.

"What on earth have they done with the little gal? I don't see her anywhar. Can the redskins have murdered her?" and used as the "Crow-Killer" was to scenes of blood, he shuddered when he thought of Leona lying dead on the prairie and the beautiful red-gold hair hanging at the belt of some savage chief as a trophy of victory.

The pipe was passed around, and when it had completed the circle, the old warrior, the uncle of "White Vulture," who was called the "Thunder-Cloud," spoke.

"My brothers are in council; their hearts are brave like the great white bear; their tongues are straight as the arrow. Will the chiefs of the Crow nation attack the white wagons again, or will they go to their lodges in the great mountains?"

Then up rose a brawny savage, hideously streaked with black paint. It was the same Indian who had, on the previous night, captured the hapless Leona. He was known among the Crows as the "Black Dog."

It was very evident to the scout, from the "Black Dog's" speech, that he was a rival of the "White Vulture."

The "Black Dog" advocated an immediate descent upon the train—declared that the whites were whipped and would fly before another attack—in a covert way insinuated that the chiefs in favor of returning home were cowards—a course which gained the "Black Dog" no friends, but made him enemies, for the majority of the Crows were fully satisfied that the emigrants, headed by the dreaded "Crow-Killer," were more than a match for them.

Then the "White Vulture" spoke:

"My brothers," he said, "have listened to the words of the 'Black Dog'; he has said that some of the hearts of the Crow chiefs are white—that they feared the pale-faces. My brother, the 'Black Dog,' is a great warrior, a great chief," and the lip of the "White Vulture" curled in scorn. "While the other chiefs of the Crow nation can show wounds from the fight with the white wagons, my brother, the 'Black Dog,' can show none. He has no wounds, but he has a pale-face squaw, that he took in single fight. My brother is a mighty warrior."

It was evident that all the chiefs sided with the "White Vulture," as a sneer was upon every lip. The "Black Dog's" brows were dark with rage. In a voice trembling with suppressed passion he answered the "White Vulture."

"The 'White Vulture' speaks with a forked tongue; his heart is black toward his brother. The 'Black Dog' has no wounds because the Great Spirit smiled on him and the pale-faces could not harm him. Though he has no wounds, yet he gave wounds; the white-wagon braves shrunk before him like the grass before the wind. The 'Black Dog' is not a snake; he crawls not on the ground; but his way is like the eagle. The 'Black Dog' is not blind like an owl, he would not have run his head against the

white wagons to slaughter the braves of the Crow nation. The 'White Vulture' is a great chief; the snakes that crawl in the grass and the dogs that lick the hands that feed them, say he is the 'great fighting-man of the Crow nation'; yet the squaws at our lodges, at the great mountains, will mourn for the braves that fell by the hands of the white warriors, by the Yellowstone, when the 'White Vulture' led them."

Astonishment was visible upon the faces of the other chiefs, the "White Vulture" alone excepted, at this speech. The face of the "great fighting-man of the Crow nation" was like marble, no trace of anger appeared upon it at the bitter speech of his foe. The "Crow-Killer" watched the scene eagerly.

"He'll give the 'Black Dog' a lick under the short ribs, the first thing he knows on. He a fighter, wahl!" and the expression of contempt was evidently intended for the Dog chief. "If the 'White Vulture' goes for him, I'll bet my pile on him every time."

The "White Vulture" arose from his seat to answer the speech of the "Black Dog"; all the chiefs looked on with evident anxiety; that a storm was brewing that might end in blood was evident to all.

"The 'White Vulture' has listened with his ears open to the words of the 'Black Dog,'" began the chief. "The chief has said that the 'White Vulture' led the braves of the Crow nation to death: what is death to a warrior? Nothing! Does the 'Black Dog' know the reason why the braves of the white wagons beat the red chiefs? If not, the 'White Vulture' will tell him. The red braves were to creep upon the white wagons as the panther creeps upon his prey; then they were to spring upon the whites as quick as the forked light comes from the hand of the Great Spirit—the red chiefs were closing in upon the white wagons, but they were not ready for the attack, when the squall of a squaw, the mighty capture of the 'Black Dog,' gave warning to the whites that their foes were near. If the 'Black Dog' had not captured the white squaw the Crows would have beaten the pale-faces."

A low murmur went round the circle; all agreed with the "White Vulture," save, of course, the "Black Dog," who, with his hand clutched instinctively on his knife, glared upon his foe.

"My brother talks straight!" said the "Thunder-Cloud."

Then, calm as a statue, the "White Vulture" went on in his speech:

"My brothers gave me the command of the expedition; it was good; they are great chiefs, as brave as the white bear and wise as the beaver."

All the chiefs bowed assent; the compliment pleased them. Human nature is the same, whether embosomed in the red breast or the white. The "Black Dog" alone looked surly; he saw clearly that the chiefs were all against him, and his heart swelled with rage to see his foe triumph.

The "White Vulture" continued:

"The 'Black Dog' has said that the squaws of the Crow nation will mourn and sing the death-song for the young braves that the 'White Vulture' led to their graves. The 'Black Dog' lies!" and the accusation came forth with terrific force from the lips of the chief. "The squaws in the Crow lodges by the big mountain will mourn for the braves slaughtered by the 'Black Dog' for the sake of the white squaw."

The face of the "Black Dog" was purple with passion. In a voice hoarse with rage, and drawing the sharp scalping-knife from his girdle as he spoke, he addressed the "White Vulture":

"If the great fighting-man of the Crow nation does not fear, he will follow the 'Black Dog'."

And with a stately step the warrior, knife in hand, marched off toward the thicket where in the "Crow-Killer" was concealed. The "White Vulture" understood the challenge to mortal combat, and drawing his knife he followed the "Black Dog." The rest of the chiefs remained seated in the circle awaiting the result.

The "Black Dog" headed directly for the spot where the "Crow-Killer" lay.

"Jerusalem!" muttered the "Crow-Killer," as the warriors came toward his hiding-place, "if they keep on, they'll settle me. I'll kill that skunk first any way, an' save the 'White Vulture' the trouble."

The scout drew his knife, but the "Black Dog" turned off abruptly to the right and entered the thicket not far from where the scout was ambushed. Behind stalked the "White Vulture."

Some thirty feet from where the "Crow-Kil-

ler" lay, was a little space unincumbered by bushes. To this spot the "Black Dog" led the "White Vulture."

The "Crow-Killer," from his hiding-place, commanded a full view of the scene, by merely turning his head.

"Sho!" he muttered, "it will be as good as a circus; but if the 'White Vulture' don't settle that fellow's hash, I ain't any judge of fighting," and then with eager eyes he looked upon the scene.

The two chiefs surveyed each other for a moment, their long, keen-edged blades glittering in their hands. Then the "Black Dog" advanced upon the "White Vulture" and began the attack. A moment they swayed from side to side, like pugilists, the glittering eyes watching for a weak spot in their opponent's guard; then suddenly the "Black Dog" made a desperate lunge at the breast of the "White Vulture." The chief avoided it by skillfully jumping back, and before the "Black Dog" could recover himself, with a quick downward motion he slashed the "Black Dog" across the face, cutting a terrible gash from the forehead to the chin, from which the blood streamed freely. Maddened with the pain and blinded by the blood which streamed into his eyes, the "Black Dog" made a desperate push on his nimble opponent as if to crush him by his weight; the "White Vulture," quick as a cat, avoided the thrust, by stepping to one side, and then, as the "Black Dog" passed by him in his mad rush, he lunged at him and made a terrible wound in his side. The "Black Dog" fell on his knees, the blood streaming from the two wounds; his strength was going fast—the wound in his side was mortal. Twice he attempted to rise and twice he sunk back on his knees. The "White Vulture" stood at a little distance with folded arms and regarded him with a calm smile. A third time the "Black Dog" essayed to gain his feet, his eyes still glaring vengeance upon his foe. With a mighty effort the chief arose and stood erect. A single instant only did he keep his feet; and then his strength failing, the knife dropped from his nerveless hand and he sunk to the ground, dead.

For a few moments the "White Vulture"—who had not received even a single scratch in the encounter—regarded the foe who had fallen by his arm. Calmly he looked upon him, then approached, took the body of the dead Indian in his arms, carried it to the river's bank and committed it to the waters, then he carefully washed off the blood-stains caused by handling the body, from his hands and breast, cleaned his knife and returned to the camp.

"He's chain-lightning!" said Abe, who had not lost a single incident of the exciting scene.

The "White Vulture" strode into the circle of chiefs, and took his former seat. They all surveyed him earnestly, but no trace of the deadly conflict through which he had just passed was upon his person.

"Brothers, listen," he said, as he resumed his seat. "The Great Spirit is angry with the 'Black Dog' for having caused so many young braves to be slain by the white-wagon braves; the 'Black Dog' fell into the swift waters and the Crow nation will see him no more. The 'White Vulture' will take the pale-face squaw of the 'Black Dog,' and he will give his brothers his share of the fur-wagon. Is it good?"

The chiefs gravely nodded assent; it was not well for any of the braves of the Crow nation to cross the will of the "White Vulture."

The scout in his hiding-place was struck with a sudden idea.

"Durned if I don't believe he picked the quarrel with the 'Black Dog' just to get hold of this 'white squaw'; that's why he wiped him out. He's a cute Injun," soliloquized the guide. "The 'white squaw' must be Miss Leona, 'cos thar ain't any other female missing. I'm afraid that the 'Black Dog' won't be the only man he's got to wipe out afore he can have the 'white squaw.' But, whar on earth is the gal? I can't see her anywhar. She must be in the timber."

And so the "Crow-Killer" watched the Indians eagerly, keen to discover their plans.

CHAPTER X.

OLD ABE ON A CRUISE.

AFTER a very brief debate, the Crow chiefs decided to give up the attack on the wagon-train and return to their homes, being fully satisfied there was but little chance of success in continuing the fight with the pale-faces.

Not a single word was said respecting the fate of the "Black Dog"; all accepted the story of the "White Vulture" that the Dog chief had fallen into the swift waters; and though of course the braves were too sensible not to know

that the "White Vulture" must have had some agency in the matter, yet the explanation was reasonable and probably would satisfy the friends and relatives of the dead brave at home.

The council now broke up, and braves were dispatched to call in the warriors to prepare for the march. Hardly had they departed when two mounted Indians, bearing the body of the young brave slain on his post in the little glade by the "Crow-Killer," dashed into the camp.

The warriors crowded around and examined the body with wonder. That a foe should dare to slay one of their pickets, and accomplish it, too, without exciting the slightest alarm, was a puzzle to them.

The old chief, the "Thunder-Cloud," carefully examined the body; he could see no other wound save the single knife-thrust through the heart—a blow evidently driven home by a powerful and practiced arm.

There was silence in the throng.

"The 'Crow-Killer'!" said the old chief. He had often seen the deadly effects of the old Indian-fighter's arm, and rightly guessed who had slain the young brave.

Within half an hour, the "Crow-Killer," from his hiding-place, had the satisfaction of seeing the red braves gather in their warriors, mount their horses and depart, taking a course that led to the west; but no sign did he see of Leona. Yet it was evident from the words of the chiefs, that she was a prisoner in their hands.

"I'm sart'in that she's in their hands," he reflected, as the last of the red chiefs disappeared from the little glade and was hid from his eyes by the thicket which cut off his view of the distant prairie to the west. "Now, the best thing I can do is to get back to the wagons as soon as possible. I'll send Dave on with the train to Montana, and then I'll trail the red devils an' try an' sneak the little gal out of their clutches. That will be no easy matter, I'm afeard; but, thar's nothin' like tryin'. I've been wantin' to go to the Crow nation for a long time; now hyar's a chance. First, to rescue the little gal; second, to find out 'bout my Injun wife. The sooner I'm off for camp the better."

Carefully through the timber the guide retraced his steps.

When the "Crow-Killer" reached the glade where he had slain the Crow warrior, he halted for a moment in the timber at its edge.

"Pears to me," he said, talking low to himself, as usual, "that the other side of this leetle opening in the timber would be jist the place for Dave to ambush himself. I'm downright sorry that I hain't had a chance to lead a dozen or so of the red devils into his fire, but, what can't be cured must be endured, as I've hearn say. Guess I'll find out whether Dave's thar or not."

Putting his hands to his mouth, Abe gave a short quick bark like a coyote.

In a second the bark was repeated on the other side of the glade from the thicket.

Fearlessly the "Crow-Killer" stepped from the timber into the open space, and as he did so, Dave, rifle in hand, stepped from among the bushes on the opposite side of the glade while behind him appeared some four of the emigrants.

"Are the Indians near?" questioned Dave, as he met the "Crow-Killer" in the center of the little opening and wrung him warmly by the hand.

"Nary Injun," responded the old hunter. "They've taken the back track and gone off, bag, an' baggage, for the mountains."

"And Leona?" anxiously questioned the young guide.

"I hain't seen her," said Abe.

The expression of disappointment upon the manly features of Dave was painful to behold. The old guide hastened to relieve his mind.

"Don't look or feel down-hearted, man. Though I hain't seen her, yet I've hearn of her."

"You have?" cried Dave, eagerly.

"You bet! But 'tain't much consolation for you. She's in the hands of the Crows, and they're carrying her off for the mountains."

Then the "Crow-Killer" told Dave all that he had witnessed from his hiding-place. When he had finished his story, Dave for a few minutes was silent, apparently in deep thought.

"Abe, what shall I do?" he asked, at length.

"I s'pose you want my honest advice," said the "Crow-Killer."

"Yes," responded the young guide.

"Wal, the case is jist hyar; the Crows are carrying the gal off to their lodges in the mountains, in the Crow nation, probably to the vil-

lage of the 'Thunder Cloud.' When they get thar, of course they'll celebrate the capture of the fur wagons; then they'll probably marry the little gal to the 'White Vulture'; that's the programme, I think."

"But, if we with a small party follow them instantly, we might be able to rescue Leona from their hands," said Dave, eagerly.

"Small chance of that, Dave," replied the "Crow-Killer," shaking his head gravely. "The Injuns are sixty or seventy strong, an' they won't let the grass grow under their feet now, till they reach home. If we follered an' come up with 'em, the chances are ten to one, that we'd all be wiped out. Besides, Dave," and the "Crow-Killer," laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, "you forget the wagon-train. We've pledged our word to take the train safe to Montana, to guide it an' fight for it, an' you know, Dave, a man ain't got much left in this world arter he loses his word. It's a hard thing, I know. You love the little gal, an' it's a hard thing to go on an' leave her helpless, as it 'pears, in the hands of these red devils; but thar's women and children in that 'are train, an' our word is pledged to put 'em through to Montana."

"I know it! I know it!" cried the young man, wrestling with the agony of pain that thrilled through his heart, as he thought of the peril of his Leona, the only woman in the world that he had ever loved. "I know our word is pledged, but, to think of Leona being borne away helpless in the hands of these red demons! Oh, Abe! show me some way that I can at least risk my life in an attempt to save her."

"Don't take it so hard, Davy, lad," said the "Crow-Killer," in a voice that showed his deep feeling for the young hunter. "I've a plan in my head that I think will help us a little. Two days' travel due north will bring the train to Fort Benton. At Fort Benton you can get guides to take our places. Now, this is the way we'll fix it. I'll speak to the emigrants, explain how the matter stands, an' ask 'em to let me off now. I don't think they'll hesitate for a minute to do it; then I'll foller the Crows. I know the country as well as I do my own hand; I've been in the village of the 'Thunder-Cloud' before, though it were years ago. You carry the train on to Fort Benton, get the guides thar for 'em, then strike down the Missouri. The Injun village is 'bout a hundred miles, as the crows flies, from the fort; it lies in a leetle plain, between the Missouri and the mountains. The country is all timbered and fine for scouting. It will take you two days to reach Fort Benton, an' then two days more to get to the Injun village. When you get near the village, you foller the river all the time. Jist hide your horse in the timber an' scout in on foot. I'll keep a look-out for you. Now, what do you think of the plan? My idea for you to go on with the train an' let me foller the Crows is 'cos I know the country out thar so much better than you do, an' I can see exactly how things air, afore you come."

"I agree with you!" cried Dave, shaking the old hunter's hand warmly. "I will go on with the train, and then will join you on the Missouri. I feel sure we shall save her from the hands of these red devils."

"Yes, an' cunning alone can do it, for in that country of theirs, the Crows can whip ten times their number easy; but if we use our heads I think we can flax 'em."

To the men of the train, Abe briefly explained his plan to rescue Leona from the hands of the Crows. The emigrants willingly gave their consent to his departure, for not a man was there—Dick Hickman alone excepted—but would have risked their lives for the captive girl. So the wagon-train again proceeded on its march for golden Montana.

With a hearty shake of the hand, Abe and Dave parted—Dave riding on with the train, and Abe, mounted on the trusty roan mare, heading westward on the trail of the Crows.

"Guess I needn't to hurry myself much," said the "Crow-Killer," as, holding his steed by the spot where the Indians had been camped, he watched the white-topped wagons as they disappeared in the distance over the rolling prairie.

Finally the last one was lost to sight, and he remained alone upon the prairie.

"I reckon I shan't bother myself much to foller their trail," soliloquized the old guide. "The Injuns, of course, are going to the village of the 'Thunder-Cloud,' an' I think I could find that in the darkest night I ever did see. So I'll ride on slowly an' not worry myself. It's 'bout two days' journey, if the Crows travel fast, an' I kinder think they will. So, old hoss, you an' I will take it easy."

And so the hunter journeyed on leisurely. For the first five miles the trail led by the bank of the Yellowstone; then the river turned abruptly to the south, and the trail, parting from it, led across the prairie, westward.

At sundown the hunter selected a convenient clump of timber, let his horse feed on the fresh young prairie-grass, made a scanty meal from a store of sun-dried beef and some hard crackers that he carried, soldier-fashion, in his saddle-bags; then, after a careful survey of the country around, went to sleep.

Early at sunrise on the following morning the "Crow-Killer" awoke, made another scanty meal, mounted his horse and again rode on the trail.

The savages had not even taken the trouble to conceal their tracks, confident, doubtless, in the number of their band and the improbability of any one following in pursuit. So the old hunter had but little trouble in following the plainly-defined trail.

On the evening of the second day thinking that he was within ten miles of the Indian camp, the old guide dismounted and halted for the night.

The third morning's light found him again in the saddle.

The surface of the country had greatly changed, and showed that he was at the base of the Rocky Mountains; though on the east bank of the river, beyond the timber that fringed the stream, commenced the vast prairie that extended eastward to the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers, and which is commonly called the valley of the Yellowstone, as fertile a spot of land as the sun ever shone upon.

The "Crow-Killer" recrossed the river, made a circuit around the Indian village so as to approach it from the north, as Dave would come up the bank of the river from the north and it would clearly be an impossibility for the guide to meet him if he remained south of the Indian village.

The "Crow-Killer" accomplished his purpose; he could easily tell the position of the village, by the smoke arising from it and floating on the clear mountain air.

The guide carefully hid his horse in the thicket on the river's bank, some three miles from the Indian settlement, and then carefully approached it on foot.

The country was rough and uneven, and, as the "Crow-Killer" had said, excellent for scouting. The village lay in a little hollow, near the Missouri, surrounded on all sides, except the one washed by the river, by hills heavily timbered.

The scout had got within a mile or so of the village—he could tell its position by the smoke—and was proceeding cautiously along through a little glade between two rocky hills, when he was suddenly startled by a noise in the shrubbery right before him. Hardly had he stopped, and before he could turn to retreat, forth from the thicket came a huge grizzly bear, who made directly for the hunter. Abe did not dare to use his rifle, for the report would bring the Indians upon him—flight was his only hope, for a man stands but little chance for his life in a close encounter with the brown monarch of the Rocky Mountains.

Luckily a tree was near at hand, a good-sized oak. Dropping his rifle, the "Crow-Killer" sprang for the tree, and soon ensconced himself in its lower branches.

The grizzly came to the foot of the tree and looked upward; then, to Abe's dismay, forth from the thicket marched another grizzly, if anything larger than the first.

"Wal, I'm in for it!" thought Abe. "I'd rather fight the Injuns than these durned brutes. If I ain't in a pesky difficulty then my name's not Abe."

The second grizzly joined the first at the bottom of the tree, and then both beasts looked up at the hunter and licked their jaws as if they expected he would soon fall into them.

Luckily for the man, as it proved, the oak was a small tree, and but one of the bears could ascend it at a time, for the grizzly is a tree-climber as well as his brother, the black bear.

Abe watched the grizzlies closely; he knew their habits well; these were evidently hungry, and would soon ascend the tree for their prey.

How repulse the attack of the brutes! All of the bear kind have very tender noses; the grizzly ascending the tree could not very well begin an attack until he reached the limbs. So the hunter drew his sharp knife, cut a heavy club from a convenient branch, and trimming it of its limbs, awaited the bear's approach.

Bruin stood upon his hind legs a moment, and then, hugging the tree-trunk in his strong paws, began his slow ascent.

As the ugly creature came within reach, Abe dealt it a terrific blow with the club on the tender snout, that brought a howl of agony from the mountain king and drove him back. Again he came on; again the strong arm of the "Crow-Killer" brought the heavy club down upon his nose; this time a shower of blows followed the first, and the bear, howling with agony, relinquished the assault and descended hastily to the ground, where he rolled around and rubbed his nose with his great paws, evidently in extreme pain.

The hunter chuckled with delight.

Then the second bear, not understanding the cause of his companion's defeat, ascended the tree; the same reception that the first bear met with was accorded to the second, and he, too, speedily retreated from the shower of blows rained down upon his tender snout.

The two bears held a sort of consultation at the foot of the tree, rubbing their noses in a comical way, and evidently greatly astonished at their defeat, and then, as if fully satisfied, they trotted off to the thicket from which they came, and left the "Crow-Killer" master of the field.

The guide had great difficulty to refrain from saluting the departing brutes with a yell of triumph, but the near neighborhood of the Indians checked him.

After being fully satisfied that the grizzlies really had retired, Abe descended from his perch, picked up his rifle, and again resumed his advance toward the Crow village.

CHAPTER XI.

A RAID INTO THE CROW VILLAGE.

THREE days had passed since the "Crow-Killer" had arrived at the Indian village. On the afternoon of the second he was joined by Dave, who had ridden night as well as day from Fort Benton.

The two scouts had taken up a position in a thicket, on one of the hills overlooking the Crow village, and distant from it about a half a mile. From their post they could see all that passed in the Indian town.

From the strict watch kept around one of the lodges apart from the rest in the northern section of the village, and from the fact that the "White Vulture" seemed to be the only chief that visited it, the "Crow-Killer" came to the conclusion that Leona was there confined.

The Indians had celebrated their capture of the fur-wagons in their usual manner, and it was evident that with the furs they had also captured some "fire-water," for half the braves were crazy drunk, and several murderous affrays already had taken place between the drunken savages. It had required all the efforts of the "White Vulture" and the older chiefs to prevent a general fight taking place.

"Well, Abe," said Dave, as the evening of the third day drew on, "have you devised any plan yet, so that we can penetrate into the village and at least make an attempt to rescue my poor Leona?"

"Go easy, Dave," said the "Crow-Killer," in his usual calm way; "I ain't a-goin' only to attempt to rescue the little gal, but I'm a-goin' to do it—that is if Heaven is willin', an' I don't know why it shouldn't be, when the object is so good. If you've noticed, the 'White Vulture,' jist 'bout dusk, generally walks along past the lodge—where I think the little gal is—an' goes into the woods beyond it. I s'pose he likes to get away from the rest of the drunken crowd. Now, my idea is, we'll leave this ambush, steal down an' hide in the thicket, jist beyond the lone lodge; when the 'White Vulture' comes into the thicket, we'll jump upon, gag and bind him, taking care not to let him cry out; then we'll strip him of his toggery, an' you put it on. You look so much like him, now that he's got the war-paint off, that with a little red daubed on your face—an' we'll be apt to find that in his pouch—none of the red devils will detect you. Then I'll put on his blanket, which will hide me, fix my face up a leetle, and we'll walk bold as can be, right into the camp. You shall walk right into the hut; I'll foller you; the braves at the door will take you for the 'White Vulture' an' they won't say nary word. When he goes within the lodge, I notice the guards always go away, an' so we'll have the coast clear. We'll not wait, but take the gal and break for our horses. The Crows won't be apt to discover that thar's anything wrong, for an hour or two, an' by that

time we'll be in the saddle, goin' down the Missouri like lightning. How's that?"

"Excellent!" cried Dave. "It can not fail!"

"Don't be too sure. I've seen the best laid plans fail; that's a good deal in luck, arter all," said the "Crow-Killer," sagely.

Cautiously the two left their ambush, and by a circuitous route, gained the timber on the north of the village.

A little path from the open glade, wherein the huts were located, into the thicket, went some thirty or forty feet and there stopped, as though the person or persons that made it had been in the habit of going so far and no further.

"You see," said the "Crow-Killer," pointing to the little path, "hyar's where he comes. All these big chiefs go away from the rest at times; the other Injuns think that they go into the woods to talk with the Great Spirit, but that's all humbug. Now, we'll put ourselves jist inside the thicket, an' when he comes, we'll jump for him. Now for a gag." Then the old hunter took a small piece of wood, tore a piece of flannel from his shirt, and wound it round the wood, thus forming a ball; then, with his knife, he cut a long strip from the tail of his hunting-shirt. "That will do to bind it in his mouth. Now for our ambush."

Then the two men hid themselves carefully in the thicket—one on each side of the little path.

Just as the shades of night were descending over the Indian village, the two guides in ambush heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

A second more, and the tall form of the "White Vulture" entered the little thicket.

Three steps he made within the wood; then, with the lightning dash of the panther, the "Crow-Killer" sprung upon and bore him over backward upon the earth, his broad hand clutching him by the throat and checking his utterance; but the "White Vulture," though taken by surprise and unarmed, showed no disposition to cry for help. A moment he struggled with his foe, but the iron weight of the "Crow-Killer" was upon him, and then, after this brief effort, as if satisfied that resistance was useless, he lay motionless and silent, while the two guides stripped off his hunting-shirt—which was curiously trimmed with the fur of the grizzly bear—and his leggins from him; the gag had been placed in his mouth and firmly secured there; then they bound his arms and legs together tightly with their belts.

The warrior bore the treatment without resistance.

The "Crow-Killer" wrapped himself in the blanket of the chief. Dave put on the hunting-shirt and leggins. In the Indian's pouch, as the guide had anticipated, they found red paint, with which they stained their faces, each acting as artist to decorate the other.

Casting a final glance at the prostrate warrior, the two whites left the little thicket and stalked toward the village. Dave had placed the head-dress of the "White Vulture" upon his head, when he became a perfect likeness of the Crow chief.

On went Dave with a slow and stately step, followed by the "Crow-Killer." They reached the little isolated lodge. The braves, mistaking Dave for the "White Vulture," took but little notice of him, and left their post as soon as he entered the little lodge. The "Crow-Killer" quickly followed, as if by order of the chief.

By the dim light of the fire that blazed fitfully in a corner of the lodge, Dave discerned a female figure reclining on a low couch of bear-skins; the face was hidden by the hands, but the red-gold locks, that hung down over her shoulders, told who the female was.

She raised her head, hearing his approach; and beholding, as she thought, the hated painted face of the "White Vulture," she shrunk from him.

"Leona, do not scream!" said Dave, in a voice tremulous with emotion.

She did not scream, but murmured, "Saved—saved!"

"Yes, if human aid can save you," said Dave, earnestly, pressing her to his breast.

"Come!" commanded the "Crow-Killer": "no time to lose."

No time indeed! for an Indian whoop rung out on the still air. Dave started, and Leona clung tighter to the breast of her lover.

Then there was a rush of footsteps by the lodge.

"Shall we venture?" said Dave.

"We mought as well," replied Abe.

Then again came another prolonged whoop, this time answered by a dozen others, seemingly in rage.

"By ginger!" and the "Crow-Killer" started in astonishment, "the 'White Vulture'!"

"Impossible!" cried Dave; "he could not have got the gag out of his mouth. Let us make the attempt to escape at once."

"All right," replied Abe; "come on." As he lifted the skin, another series of war-whoops, coming from the north, from the direction of the little thicket where they had left the "White Vulture," caused him to pause.

"What is the matter?" asked Dave, in alarm.

"Matter enough!" said the "Crow-Killer," earnestly. "The path between us an' the thicket is filled with the red-skins."

"Do you think they have discovered the 'White Vulture'?" cried Dave.

"I don't know," replied Abe, despondingly, "but I'm afeard they have."

"Oh, Dave!" cried Leona, clinging to her lover, "will they separate us? Oh, I would rather die than lose you!"

"Hope for the best, Leona," said Dave, softly, yet in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"Do you think we can escape?" she asked, looking up into the guide's face with those large blue eyes, so beautiful, so full of love and trust.

"I don't know," said Dave, sadly, "Heaven alone knows. We'll do the best we can; but, if the red-skins have discovered us, I'm afraid that nothing on earth can save us."

The "Crow-Killer" had been listening anxiously at the door of the lodge. The war-whoops had ceased, and a dead silence reigned in the Indian camp.

"Well, Abe?" questioned Dave.

"I don't hear any thing more," said Abe.

"After all, maybe it was only some of the Injuns in one of their drunken sprees; but what they were doing up hyar, beyond the lodge, puzzles me. At present they're right between us an' the wood; so we can't stir without running into their clutches."

Just then another chorus of yells rung out on the air; the Indians were apparently approaching the lodge, as the yells were getting nearer every moment.

"Dave!" cried the "Crow-Killer," "I'm afeard we're gone up; the Injuns are coming nearer and nearer every moment."

"Can we not fight our way through them?" cried the young guide, in desperation.

"Nary chance for that," and the "Crow-Killer" shook his head sagely. "If we are discovered, better not make any resistance; we shall only enrage 'em without doing us any good. If we fight 'em, we're sure to be overpowered, 'cos they're a hundred to one; they'll only kill us outright; while, if we submit, they'll shut us up as prisoners, till they get ready to torture us, and we then stand some chance of escaping. Just think, Dave, you an' I dead, what will become of the little gal?"

Then came on the night-air the sound of hurried footsteps, approaching closer and closer.

"They're coming!" cried the "Crow-Killer."

"I'm afeard, Dave, that it's all up with us; the devils seem to be heading right for the lodge."

"Can we not cut a hole and escape through the back of the lodge?" said Dave, eagerly.

"That's jist what I were a-thinking 'bout; but the cussed red-skins seem to be all around us. I guess we mought as well keep quiet awhile, 'cos they may not be after us, arter all—that's no tellin'. Maybe it's only some of the drunken Injuns."

But, as if to give the lie to the hunter's words, the Indian war-whoop rung around the lodge, showing it to be completely surrounded by the Crow warriors; then came the sound of many footsteps approaching the door of the wigwam. The "Crow-Killer" stepped back a few paces, folded his arms and waited for the entrance of the foe.

Dave was in despair; he had dared every thing to save the girl he loved, and now, at the very moment of success, after penetrating to the Indian village—after gaining access to the prison of the captive girl—to be baffled by the red-skins was terrible. Oh, how he wished for a giant's strength to crush the yelling red demons that surrounded him! But, no avenue of escape was open; resistance was useless; fate was against and had crushed him.

A few minutes the scouts waited in breathless suspense; they could hear the footsteps of the Indians as they moved around the lodge, but as yet they had not attempted to enter.

"The red sarpints are mighty afeard, I should think, if they have discovered us, not to come an' go for us," said Abe, listening to the sounds without.

"Pray Heaven!" exclaimed Dave, "that they do not suspect that we are here."

"Wal, if they don't know that we are hyar, I

would like to know what in thunder they're cavorting round hyar for."

Another torrent of yells broke forth upon the air.

Leona clung tighter to her lover's breast.

"Oh, they will kill you," cried the poor girl, more eager for her lover's safety than for her own.

"We must all die some time, Leona," said Dave, sadly, imprinting a farewell kiss upon her lips, now colorless with dread.

Again the yells echoed around the lodge and footsteps approached the door.

"They're comin', sart'in," said the "Crow-Killer," coolly.

Then the skin that served as a door was torn away, and the tall form of the "White Vulture" stalked into the lodge, followed by the Crow braves.

As the hunter had thought, the "White Vulture" had contrived to slip the gag from his mouth, and it was his war-whoop summoning the Crows to his assistance that had first startled the guides.

The "White Vulture" surveyed the scene before him for a few moments in silence.

The guides, on their part, spoke not. The "Crow-Killer" stood, with folded arms, and looked upon his foes, while Dave supported the slight form of Leona.

"The 'Crow-Killer' is a great warrior, to dare to come into the lodges of his foes," said the "White Vulture." "The Great Spirit has given him into the hands of the Crow nation, and he shall die like a chief."

Then, at a motion from the "White Vulture," the Indians proceeded to bind Dave and the "Crow-Killer," who submitted without resistance—which would, indeed, have been hopeless. Leona, almost fainting, was taken from Dave's side, and then the two whites were removed to another lodge, near the center of the village, and placed under a strong guard.

CHAPTER XII.

"THUNDER-CLOUD'S" REVELATION.

"WAL, we're in for it," said the "Crow-Killer," philosophically. "But, if they will only give us time, we may trick 'em yet," he said.

"Yes, but they will not give us time; they are too afraid of us to linger in their vengeance."

"You're right, Dave; I expect they'll settle our hash in short order. Wal, I've been fighting the Crows 'bout twenty years now; I've shed the life's blood of many a Crow chief, and they can only take my life in return; so the odds are on my side," said the "Crow-Killer."

At that moment the old chief, the "Thunder-Cloud," followed by two other warriors entered the lodge.

"Take the young brave to the lodge of the 'Thunder-Cloud.'" The Indians assisted Dave to rise from the skin-couch upon which he had been placed.

"Let the 'Crow-Killer' open his ears and hear the words of the Crow chief," continued the old brave.

The two Indians conducted Dave from the lodge, through the village, to the hut of "Thunder-Cloud." Just at the entrance, the party was met by the "White Vulture," who looked at the warriors in astonishment.

"Who has dared to take the pale-face from the lodge where the 'White Vulture' placed him?" questioned the chief, angrily.

"The 'Thunder-Cloud' would talk with the 'Crow-Killer' alone," responded one of the Indians; "he has a secret to tell the pale-face that will make the great chief howl like a dog."

"It is well; the 'Thunder-Cloud' is a great chief; let my brothers go on," replied the "White Vulture" as he walked away. The Indians placed Dave in the lodge and left him to solitude and the bitterness of his own reflections.

The "White Vulture" walked slowly through the village, paused at the hut wherein was confined the "Crow-Killer"—listened for a moment at the door, and then as if hearing something to excite his curiosity, he noiselessly stole round to the back of the lodge, extended himself upon the ground and listened to the conversation going on within.

After the Indians had departed with Dave, the "Thunder-Cloud" gazed with a look of curiosity upon the massive form of the great enemy of his nation—the famous "Crow-Killer"—as he lay extended on the bed of bear-skins.

The hunter's face was stoically indifferent as he gazed upon the old chief.

After a long silence, the old chief stirred up the little fire burning within the lodge, which threw a glimmering, uncertain light around.

"The 'Crow-Killer' is a great chief," said the old warrior, breaking the silence.

"What does the 'Thunder Cloud' want with the 'Crow-Killer'?" asked the guide, speaking in the Crow tongue.

"Many braves of the Crow nation have been sent to the happy hunting-grounds by the knife and the bullet of the 'Crow-Killer.'"

"The 'Thunder Cloud' speaks truth," replied Abe. "I've done for enough Crows to keep the race on short allowance for braves."

"The 'Crow-Killer' is a great warrior; he steals like a snake into the lodges of the Crows and he overcomes the great chief, the 'White Vulture,' in single fight; the blood of the Crow braves is red upon his hands; their spirits cry from the white clouds for vengeance. It is good; the chiefs of the Crows listen; their ears are open, they hear the wail of their slaughtered brothers; the 'Crow-Killer' is a great chief, he will die before the sun comes over the big river."

"The chief speaks with a straight tongue; the 'Crow-Killer' has done all that the chief has said; he is a great warrior and the Crows are dogs that howl and run before him; no Crow chief dares to meet the 'Crow-Killer' in single fight. He has slain every Crow warrior that has faced him. The 'Thunder Cloud' had a brother; that brother, the 'Rolling Cloud,' fell by the knife of the 'Crow-Killer'; he stole away the singing bird of the Crows, and the 'Little Star' sung many moons in the wigwam of the white chief. The 'Crow-Killer' does not fear death; he is not a dog to howl with fear; he will be tied to the torture-stake and he will laugh at the Crow warriors that run from him when he is free and dance around him when he is tied. The Crows are dogs and the 'Crow-Killer' spits upon them!"

The veins upon the forehead of the Indian swelled purple with rage, as he listened to the taunts of the demon of his race—taunts hurled at him in his own tongue. At last, the warrior found his voice:

"The 'Crow-Killer' talks big; let him open his ears and the 'Thunder Cloud' will speak words that will make him howl like a dog. The 'Crow-Killer' will not die like a chief at the torture-stake; he will die here in the wigwam of the Crow—die by the knife of the 'Thunder Cloud'; but, before the red chief strikes the pale-face, he shall listen to words that kill."

The "Thunder Cloud" approached nearer to the "Crow-Killer," and then, with a glance of deadly hatred, he spoke again:

"The 'Crow-Killer' has said that he stole away the 'Little Star' and that she sung many moons in his wigwam by the big river. The white chief speaks truth. He did steal the singing bird of the Crow nation; she sung in his lodge, and when the ice in the big river melted, the 'Little Star' gave the 'Crow-Killer' two young braves. The white chief was proud of his papposes, but the Crows had not forgotten the singing bird, and when the leaves and grass began to die, the 'Thunder Cloud' led the warriors of the Crows to the big river to the lodge of the 'Crow-Killer' and took his squaw and his two papposes. Then they traveled to the Crow villages, but when all was dark they halted by the bank of the big river; there the Blackfeet surprised the Crow camp; the Crow braves fought like the white bear, but the Blackfeet were like the blades of grass on the prairie and took the 'Little Star' and the two papposes of the 'Crow-Killer'; but the blue-coated white braves came upon the Blackfeet and took their scalps. Then the Blackfeet warriors, flying with the 'Little Star' and the papposes, were set upon by the Crow braves, who again took the 'Little Star' and the young braves; but, after the fight, one of the papposes was gone." The old hunter started in astonishment.

"Either the Blackfeet braves or the blue-coated whites had taken one of the papposes, but the Crows had the 'Little Star' and the other pappose. They carried them to their lodges by the big mountains. The 'Little Star' would not marry the 'Rolling Cloud,' and she was killed by the Crow nation; but the young pappose—the pappose of the 'Crow-Killer' and the 'Little Star'—was reared and made a warrior of by the Crows. He is now the great fighting-man of the Crow nation." Does the 'Crow-Killer' understand? the 'White Vulture' is his son! That son, to-night, has given him into the hands of the Crows. The 'Crow-Killer' has killed many a young warrior of the Crow nation, but the red chiefs will be avenged, for the 'Crow-Killer' will die and know that his son is a great chief of the Crow nation, and that son hates and will kill the whites. Has my brother heard?"

And the old chief looked down upon the guide with a glance of triumph. Busy thoughts were in the mind of the "Crow-Killer." He replied not to the Crow, and looked at him with an expression of contempt.

"My brother is silent. Have the words of the 'Thunder-Cloud' taken away his tongue? Let the 'Crow-Killer' listen again. When the light comes over the big river, the 'Thunder-Cloud' will come back, and the knife of the Crow chief will drink the blood of the 'Crow-Killer.' The chief has said; it is good." Saying which, the Indian stalked from the lodge.

In a few minutes Dave was brought back by the two guards, and again placed within the hut; then the Indians withdrew and laid themselves down before the door.

The "Crow-Killer" repeated the story of the "Thunder-Cloud" to Dave; the mystery of the birth of the young guide was all made plain, as well as the wonderful resemblance between him and the "White Vulture"; they were brothers!

"Wal, it's fate," finally exclaimed Abe; "I don't rebel ag'in' it. I confess, though, I'd like to have a chance to tell the Crows what I think about 'em afore I die. It kinder makes me feel proud to think, too, that a son of mine is their great chief. Blood will tell; the white blood, my blood, has made him what he is—the biggest fighting-man in all the Crow nation."

"We have not many hours before us," said Dave.

"No, our time is 'bout up; the old chief don't dare to let us die in public, now that we know this secret. He'll probably send the Indians that guard the lodge away on some pretense, and then quietly finish us."

And so we'll leave the two guides to their reflections and return to Leona. The poor girl was in despair; she thought to herself that she alone was to blame for the danger of her lover, for if it had not been for her, he would never have come, and would have escaped the certain death that now awaited him.

"Oh!" she cried, in agony, "why did I ever see him—why should I cost him his life?"

Some time had passed since the Indians had removed the two guides from the lodge; she dreaded every moment lest she should hear the sounds that would announce to her the death of her lover; but, the Indian village was still as death.

Suddenly the poor girl heard the sound of footsteps approaching the lodge; 'twas but a single man; the skin of the doorway was presently pushed aside, and the tall form of the "White Vulture" stood before the helpless maid. In terror she gazed upon the Indian; by the dim light of the flickering fire she could distinguish his features, now utterly divested of paint, and for the first time she noticed the wonderful resemblance that the Indian chief bore to her lover.

"Why does the Singing Bird weep?" asked the "White Vulture," in soft tones, and speaking English plainly, and with a very slight Indian accent.

"Because I am unhappy," truthfully answered the maiden.

"Why? No harm shall come to the white squaw."

Leona shook her head sorrowfully, as if in doubt.

"The wigwam of the 'White Vulture' is empty; will not the white bird come and sing in the lodge of the Crow chief?"

"What, if?" For the first time Leona guessed the fate that was intended for her, and her heart sunk within her at the very thought.

"Yes, you! The 'White Vulture' is a great chief of the Crow nation; he loves the Singing Bird of the whites; he would take her to his wigwam; she shall not work like the red squaws; she shall be the Singing Bird of the greatest chief in the Crow nation. Will the White squaw come?"

"No! no! I cannot!" cried Leona, looking pleadingly into the face of the "White Vulture."

"The Singing Bird loves another?" asked the "White Vulture," in his calm, clear tones.

"Yes," replied Leona.

"Is the Singing Bird sure that she loves another?" continued the chief.

"Yes, I am sure," said Leona, wonderingly.

"The white squaw loves the young guide who looks like the red chief, and is a prisoner in the village of the Crows?"

"Yes," answered Leona, mournfully but firmly.

"It is good; does the white hunter love the Singing Bird?" said the chief.

"Yes, loves her as his life."

"Does the white squaw know that the young hunter will die by the hands of the Crows before the sun rises over the big river?"

Leona hid her face in her hands, sobbing.

"The Singing Bird says she loves the white hunter; if she loves him, will she save him from death?"

Leona, through her tears, gazed in astonishment up at the stolid features of the Indian.

"I save him? How?" she cried.

"The white hunter's life belongs to the 'White Vulture.' If the 'White Vulture' says 'Go free,' no warrior in the Crow nation will dare say 'No.' If the Singing Bird will promise to come and sing in the lodge of the 'White Vulture,' the white hunter shall return to his people." And the Indian bent his full, dark eyes upon her as he spoke.

A few moments Leona hesitated; she could save her lover's life by sacrificing her own, for she knew full well that death would soon claim her as his own should she remain in the wilderness. Her lover had risked his life and was now to fall a sacrifice in endeavoring to save her; she could save him, and as she loved him better than she did her own life, she resolved upon her own sacrifice.

"Set him free and I promise to do whatever you will."

"The Singing Bird is wise," responded the "White Vulture," in the same calm tone as before; no trace of feeling could be discerned upon his face. "Let the Singing Bird follow me."

Then from the Indian lodge went the "White Vulture," and Leona followed him.

The chief led the way through the village, which seemed deserted, as it really was—as all the braves, with the exception of the two who watched the lodge wherein the whites were confined, were assembled at a grand council at the upper end of the village.

The chief, passing the lodges, reached the little thicket where the "Crow-Killer" and Dave had captured him a few hours before.

"The Singing Bird will wait for the chief's return and not stir?" questioned the "White Vulture."

"Yes," replied Leona, now passive in her agony.

"It is good—wait!" responded the chief.

Then the "White Vulture" left the girl, walked back through the village and halted at the door of the lodge wherein were confined the two guides. The two braves on watch at the entrance drew off to a respectful distance as the chief entered the hut.

The two hunters, by the dim light thrown from the fire, could discern who their visitor was, and they exchanged a glance of meaning as the elder looked upon his son and the younger hunter upon his brother.

Noiselessly and without a word the "White Vulture" drew his keen-edged scalping-knife, stepped across the lodge and slit the skins that formed the back of the lodge so as to make a passage through them; then passing through, he beckoned the hunters to follow. Their hands alone were bound; they obeyed the gesture in wonder. The "White Vulture" cautiously led the way back of the lodges to the outskirts of the village to the little thicket; there he halted and brought Leona forth from the wood; with a cry of joy she rushed to her lover's side, clinging to him in a passionate frenzy.

"The Singing Bird has saved the life of the white hunter by consenting to sing in the lodge of the 'White Vulture.'"

"Never!" cried Dave. "I will not accept life on such conditions."

The "Crow-Killer" regarded the "White Vulture" with a puzzled look.

Without a word, the Indian chief removed the thongs that bound the arms of the whites.

"The 'White Vulture' is the great fighting-man of the Crow nation; he has heard the words of the 'Thunder-Cloud'—his ears were open; father! brother!" and as he spoke he clasped them by the hand. "The 'Little Star' looks down from the happy hunting-grounds upon her son. See!" and he led the way, followed by all, to one side of the thicket where stood three horses. "Mount and ride for the Big Fort. The 'White Vulture' will die a Crow, but he will never more shed the blood of the whites. Will my father, my brother, think of the chief sometimes, and will the Singing Bird, when she sings in the happy wigwam of my brother, think of the 'White Vulture' who is desolate and alone? Away! Ride fast, for the Crow braves must not know that I have saved my father, my brother, and the Singing Bird."

Soon all were mounted, and walking their

horses at first, till they got beyond ear-shot of the village, they then pushed the animals to their utmost speed, taking the hiding-place of the "Crow-Killer's" roan mare and Dave's horse on their way.

The "White Vulture" watched them until they disappeared in the distance; then he turned and retraced his steps through the village, entered the lodge by the slit he had cut in the rear, and then went out through the door, passing the two braves, who still kept watch.

When the "Thunder-Cloud" entered the lodge to execute his vengeance upon the hunters, he found, to his astonishment, that they had disappeared!

A terrible commotion was the result of this, and hot chase was given, but it was a useless chase, and the Crows believe to this day that the "Crow-Killer" was aided by some evil power in his escape.

Abe, Dave, and Leona reached Fort Benton in safety, and then proceeded to Spur City, where young Dick Hickman was made to disgorge the property that he had taken possession of as his father's heir.

Leona and Dave were married; true love met its reward.

The "Crow-Killer" still continues to act as guide, but his account with the Crow nation is closed, and he no longer fights Indians, except in self-defense.

The "White Vulture" became the chief of all the Crow nation, and the terror of all the surrounding tribes. All recognized him as the greatest fighting-man of the North-west. He died as became a great chief, during a raid into the Blackfoot country, at the close of a bloody fight, in which, as usual, he had seemed to bear a charmed life. The victory was with the Crows, and the Blackfeet were scattering, routed, through the timber, when the "White Vulture" suddenly fell from his saddle. Examination showed a bullet, shot from the rear, passing through the head: the chief had been shot by one of his own nation—a relative, doubtless, of the "Black Dog" chief, that had died by the hand of the "White Vulture" on the banks of the Yellowstone. Sorrowfully the Crows bore home the body of the great fighting-man of the Crow nation.

THE END.

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